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*Ground Vertigo* by Cezar Tridapalli is one of the novels featured in the autumn 2020 Portuguese reading group run by And Other Stories.

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## **Vertigem do Chão (Ground Vertigo)**

**Cezar Tridapalli**

**Translated by James Young**

*From page 31*

His heartbeat spread across his head, neck, temples. He stretched his arms and legs into the star position, the back of his hand throbbing against the wooden floor. He inhaled deeply through his nose, exhaled through his mouth, the wind within, the air entered, rummaged around, exited. Rotation, orbit, planet. Maps and territories. He stood up suddenly and felt dizzy, forced himself to find a chair, waited for his body to reorganize itself. He no longer fitted in that kind of dance, no longer fitted in the city, in Brazil, where artists begged for their projects with no sense of continuity, cultural organizations still failed to understand the importance of process, of long research into the construction of a language. It all conspired towards a creative strangulation, artists found themselves untethered, having to think up sidelines, creativity treated as a

hobby for those with nothing to do. What you ended up with was a mass elbowing one another, every man for himself, a dance shaped by stereotypes or wanting to smash them, imitating the European model, always Europe, always the avant-garde. I live in a country of beggars, the blatant poverty at the traffic lights, the violence, still physical – he used *still* to imagine that the physical was more primitive than other forms of violence, was linked to the beasts, to the prehistory that continued to inhabit Brazil. Leonel went on convincing himself, he had to seek water from the source, but not to imitate it. Brazil, complex in its shallowness and depth, would never leave his body, it was a permanent brace, he had never considered exorcising it. At the same time, he had seen so many videos of the New Dance from Holland, even the *Nederlands Dans Theater*, or the *Dansimprovisatie Utrecht* group, with whom he had already corresponded. He had met Gonçalo Leal and Anne-Marije Elsenaar from Utrecht when the Dutch-Portuguese dancers, a couple, came to Curitiba to teach a course in improvisation – which hadn't been anything special – at the Casa Hoffmann, at a time when the Hoffmann was a hub of dance research.

The conversation had revolved around his few emails to *Dansimprovisatie Utrecht* asking about courses and costs. Gonçalo had explained that he wasn't from *Dansimprovisatie*, but lived in Utrecht, thirty minutes from Amsterdam, and danced with Anne-Marije in an independent group formed by the couple and another dancer whose name Leonel no longer remembered. According to the Portuguese, his group was more radical, more connected with performance and in depth research into language. Radical to the point of cutting tradition off at the roots, Leonel remembers hearing him say.

They spoke of Europe, of Holland, of Utrecht, a city that was like a smaller and older Amsterdam. That was what Leonel remembered. Anne-Marije was friendly, but didn't speak Portuguese, and Leonel's woeful English, coupled with her anxious conciseness, didn't make communication easy. They just smiled at each other, even though Gonçalo found the Brazilian habit of smiling at everything intriguing. He said it was contagious, and Anne-Marije seemed to be the first unfortunate victim of such aimless happiness.

The force of a habit from his teenage years made Leonel get up from the chair and select a school atlas from his books. He opened up the map of the world, but couldn't find Holland. His ignorance irritated him. He was sure he was looking at Europe, there was the Iberian Peninsula, he easily found Gonçalo's Portugal, Spain – so close to Africa, Morocco glued to it – France, England, everywhere but Holland. Where was this Eldorado of dancers? He gave up on the world map and scanned only Europe, the image magnified. The pages were stained by Leonel's boyhood fingerprints. The same countries appeared again, larger, in the same place, but not a trace of Holland. He was exasperated. Then he found Amsterdam, capital of the Netherlands. A reference from the distant past told him that Holland and the Netherlands were the same thing, or that it made no difference if they were treated as the same. His excitement drove out his anger, he could enjoy the pleasure of observation. Looking at the yellow spot with its irregular contours, where the world of Dance existed in a serious, intense, real form, was almost like the experience of being there. Stefan spun the globe and closed his eyes, poking his finger at the dizzily spinning planet. He would go where his finger stopped. It scraped the surface, chafing oceans and continents. Tsunamis and earthquakes at his all-powerful

fingertip. He stopped on Thailand. He liked the coincidence, remembering Sylvia Kristel twice in the same day. When he had seen *Emmanuelle* the film was already more than twenty years old, and he had paid no attention to the relationship between the European gent and the Thai, the latter a servant even though the former was in Asia. He liked seeing himself in *Emmanuelle*, thrilled by the struggle between two Thais unleashing crazed kicks and punches to win their prize, *Emmanuelle* kneeling to gift her body to the winner, it was there, in his memory and his computer, that faithful source of recollections. Everything watched and rewatched dozens of times. He didn't know how Stefan the teenager had understood the dialogue, especially that of the hoary old man with no sexuality whatsoever, who taught the girl eroticism. What mattered was the pleasure of the scenes, especially the final battle.

Despite his finger having stopped on Thailand, he didn't think of taking the game seriously. He didn't want to consider it a sign of any kind, he didn't want Thailand. After pretending to make a casual choice, his finger landed on Brazil, the green immensity known among the Dutch for football – he didn't buy the decline of the national team – and for samba, jungles and monkeys strewn around the streets and beaches. *Caipirinha*. The World Cup had barely helped to change the established view of the country and the Olympics had been concentrated in one city. But Stefan was moved by the television images showing skyscrapers. He didn't understand how the country worked, even the notions of distance were impossible to grasp for a Dutchman who lived in a country the size of the state of Rio de Janeiro. On TV, he saw Van Persie's goal in Salvador, the struggle against Australia in Porto Alegre, the a cappella hymn sung by Chilean fans in São Paulo – which didn't stop Vlaar from turning into a

giant who never gave the Chilean attack a chance – the comeback against Mexico in Fortaleza. The highlight was the bath of warm beer he took in the Stairway bar on Mariaplaats, when, to shouts of Krul, Krul, Krul – the goalkeeper had only come on for the penalty shootout – Holland beat Costa Rica, again in Salvador.

After that, the world became ruins, the death of Machiel, who hadn't come with him to the games, and the defeat against Argentina, which Stefan hadn't seen. Winning a silly third place match with a Brazilian team that was already on the canvas was no consolation prize.

If you liked sport, and Brazil was made up of mixtures that coexisted without tension – Holland was the same until you had to live with them – if you liked beaches, happy people, why not live in a country that had just hosted the World Cup and the Olympics, that was developing, that was climbing up the mountain while Europe, driven mad, slid down it?

He closed the book, stopped the globe. Leonel and Stefan, now united by Google Maps, looked at the jagged shape of continents divided by fragile borders. Eyes and fingers flew over a world with no visas or customs checks. Stefan typed *Brazilië*, Leonel *Holanda*, forget the Netherlands. They zoomed out, alternating their gazes between where they were and where they were going. Stefan swivelled in his chair and looked toward Brazil. Leonel did the same, emerging from the screen, that imagined territory beyond the wall. There was Brazil, there was Holland. Their eyes collided in the middle of their journeys, over the Atlantic Ocean, off the coast of Morocco. But they didn't see each other, there was only a wall, that horizon that confines and comforts. Stefan felt the same bewilderment as those men who had thought the earth

was flat, an abyss at the end of everything, into which they would forever fall. Leonel imagined the return of the Age of Discovery. The defiance, desire, and courage required to establish a different order. And chaos is a different order. He'd had enough of this latitude, enough of this platitude, of perustrated architecture and soul. Enough of medievalism stamped on every brick. Enough of ignorant people, both rich and poor, of this pre-literate, postmodern city, a pothole in every inch of the pavement. No more terror, a madman with a knife in his hand in every shadow, a tree that could fall on your head, the crazed immigrant running towards him, his steps choreographed and measured.

Stefan read practically all of the Wikipedia entry on Brazil, its political system, economy and culture. If before video games, social networks and sports had been his digital world, migrating to sites of journalism, tourism and politics represented a new cry of land ahoy. He read the news but had preconceived ideas that he wanted reaffirmed, the filter of his desire tipped the scales. He picked out the information that most suited him: Brazil was an emerging, influential country in global geopolitics, that sounded good. It had become increasingly well known for attracting major sporting events, had seen its historical poverty diminish, its middle class grow. He found newspapers and magazines, but Google's automatic translation confused more than it clarified. Attractive, clean, well-dressed people in the city centres belied the stereotypes of poverty. During the World Cup and the Olympic Games he had been more interested in Holland's performance. There was nothing like an attentive eye, which he now considered himself to have, to understand a people. It was clear this was a country that knew what it wanted, united and joyful. He was embarrassed by Holland, so small and divided. He discovered news about the

Dutch colonization of South America and about the south of Brazil, developed and Europeanized. There was a place called Paraná, near São Paulo – and who hadn't heard of São Paulo – whose biggest city, Curitiba, boasted of its exemplary social, ecological and urban planning. Other smaller towns, such as Castro, Carambei, Arapoti, all close by, had been colonized by the Dutch. Paraná was also the land of the Iguaçu Falls, upon which a continent's worth of European tourists converged each year. Soon he got tired of playing around and limited himself to looking at Curitiba through images alone. He chose photos of blue skies and colourful trees, elongated buses, and buildings, parks and wide pavements. It felt good to enter Brazil slowly, to get to know the country without having to sink his feet in too deep, to enter the sea only up to his shins. Curitiba wasn't the real Brazil, or it didn't even look like Brazil, as a Spanish journalist claimed during the World Cup. Curitiba sat in the corner, watching all the comings and goings, what was it with those provinces that wanted to dance to the reality of the coconut-breakers? He disagreed with Cícero, who refused to accept the criticism of *The Coconut Cracker* from the northeastern press. Cícero spoke poorly of the northeasterners, a backward people, what did they even want, exactly? *Frevo* and *maracatu*, *axé* music? He hadn't left the south to go up there and reproduce steps that the natives could do better than anyone. It would make no sense, but it was hard to convince the conservative mind – because although it might not seem it, the northeasterners were conservative – of the idea that art was recreation, not reproduction. When it came to getting naked at Carnival you could even say they were liberal, but when it came down to it, did they want a dance from the eighteenth-century? Listening retrospectively to his boyfriend's hysterical outburst, Leonel again

noted the enlightened discourse reproducing exactly what he criticized: stereotypes. The beach, football, heat, music, prostitution and poverty, Stefan read about Pernambuco; Holland was present in the state even today, people with light-coloured eyes and skin parched by the sun. It was a possibility. Perhaps later. *Brazil is not for beginners*, he read, a saying attributed to Tom Jobim. He had heard of Tom Jobim. *Girl from Ipanema*. He piped the song, hoisted up from a well of memory. Something told him that Curitiba was a good place for beginners in *Brazilië*. Brazil. *Brasil*. The criss-crossing information formed an agreeable map. He could grow alongside the country, Fitness Training would help to overcome language barriers; everyone has a body and needs to take good care of it. He saw a demystified, welcoming body – *hartelijk* – and without the forced plurality of Holland. Curitiba – how would you pronounce the word, with its vowels and consonants in an orderly queue? – was near São Paulo, the locomotive engine of Brazil, near the sea, there was European tradition, and Dutch colonization nearby. Did Brazilians run?

*The above extract was translated by James Young*

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