

Christmas at the *Minhocão*, 2009 / Luiza Baldan

8:00 am I clear out my apartment on Paulino Fernandes Street.
The furniture is moved to my new house in Dona Mariana Street.
I feel a terrible pain and cry compulsively. I am afraid of the unfamiliar.
A supernatural fatigue takes over me and fragility is inevitable.
3:00 pm I meet my family without planning to do so.
We have lunch together, as we have not done for a long time.
6:00 pm I arrive at the *Minhocão*, the location of the artistic residency, and my current permanent home until the 20th of December.
Fear turns to relief.
The unknown becomes my neighbor.
Mrs. Leda's Apartment 613 becomes my house.
This is not a hotel, it is my home.
It has been 17 years since my dad died and I was forced to move for the 8th time.
Today I moved for the 26th.
I saw my family and I said goodbye to them.
I met a new family.
I was welcomed with warmth, affection and attention.
The fear of the unknown ended with kindness.
There are plenty of windows in this building of plenty.
I have the feeling that everything has been left behind.
I feel so far away from the recent present and so close to any old past of small towns and beloved neighbors.
The apartment has the view of a tower and the atmosphere of a home.
I am sheltered amid the belongings of Mrs. Leda.
It has been three months since she left.
The objects are still hot, porcelain dogs bark silently on the shelf.
I wonder about the life she had with the family I am actually living with.
I make portraits in order to honor those who live here.
I see a certain tenderness of thanks in their eyes for my simple and affable gesture.
I participate in the joy of the corridor – part street, part courtyard, part living room – where the children lie, I lie, food is prepared, beer is shared amongst music and conversations.
I respect this home as if it was mine.
Now it belongs to me.

I see stains of water infiltration all over the ceiling, but they just do not bother me.
I turn my head towards the picture of Jesus Christ with a small rosary hanging on it and I feel happy.
Fireworks, football chants and many other sounds lull my night.
It is good to be alone in silence.
There is a moment of peace in which rest is needed.
I no longer press myself with decisions.
I live every moment intensely, not too much or too little, but in a genuine way.
I want to be here and all the rest I could not care less about.
I do not mind the precariousness of the place.
This does not stand out in my romanticized experience of this house.
I live another decade in these 15 days of 2009.
Today there was no running water.

Ilka's mother died.

The children's father beat his wife and pointed a gun in front of the girl.

I cried and played with the children at the same time, since it seemed more reasonable to try to distract them.

D. has been hitting M. for six years.

They had two sons and she became a mother at 14.

Today she is 21 and will spend the night out.

The kids handle the old-fashioned Russian camera and play astounded.

They want to press the shutter release even before framing the photograph.

Curiosity is beautiful and animates the process of living.

There was a boy who was especially interested.

Seriously and shyly, he took the camera purposefully.

Each child has a particular charm.

A sum of mini-personalities that make this place unique.

They drew until bedtime.

Guava juice + grape juice + *guaraná* + colored pens + crayons + paper + *guaraná* + paper + pens + *guaraná* + TV + house keys + sleep

I like to sleep sniffing mommy's feet.

Her feet smell good.

She was dating the grocer who died.

Nowadays the uncle takes care of the shop.

He brings fresh bread in the morning and travels to *Campo Grande* for the weekend.

Here in the corridor we are a family.

There was even a plan to join the flats, opening a window between the rooms for more private conversations.

But they were afraid of the aunt on the other side because she was very troublesome.

We are the fourth generation of women.

The families grew up together, multiplied.

The lady from 614 is the godmother of the one from 612, who is the godmother of the one from 614, and so on.

They found an abandoned puppy and nobody could keep it. The girl cried a lot because she wanted a little dog.

The other dogs in the corridor smelled the scent and got all hot and bothered.

Everyone had to take a bath to get rid of the bad smell.

It is very hot and we get very lazy.

The fan plays a little tune that makes you sleepy.

Hot breeze, stuffy, dead afternoon.

Not even coffee helps.

I get close to the window to see the landscape from afar, but the afternoon sun is punishing.

I go back to the other view and the people downstairs are burning copper.

More heat, more smoke.

The children do not feel any of that and play euphorically on the edge of the roof.

The luckiest ones went to the pool of a relative.

I hope someone knocks on the door, but I remember that it is already open.

You just have to enter.

The baker's horn is loud; the manicurist works in the corridor.
Madonna, the dog, sleeps joyfully with her belly on the cold floor.
The scent of a freshly bathed person invades the room.
It's about to rain.
The clouds approach.

When I was little I hit her a lot and also beat the others who wanted to hit her.
I was the only one who could hit her.
My daughter beats her daughter.
We have always been best friends.
I beat the cake for her, for you and for the neighbor, this way no one is jealous.
It is better to eat it warm, with the *brigadeiro* still soft.
Steps, dogs, birds, *Makita*, rain, cars, horns, children, a broom scraping the ground,
ball, truck engine.
Shots.
It sounds like they are inside the building, in the corridor.
They are coming from the *favela*.
Some people are still drinking beer outside.
In the same minute my phone rings.
My heart tightens.
I change the channel. Panic. *Xurupita*.
It is a bit strange to have visitors in a house that is not really mine.
Friends become tourists, passive observers of my life.
The subjects of conversation are restricted and we only talk about what is pertinent to
this place.
Nobody wants to know how I am, but how I am living.
I wanted to get out of here for the first time.
I could only smell the cat pee because someone said it was strong.
I did not like being seen as if I was in an exotic experience.
There is no exoticism here.
What is lived is pure and true enough.
The look of reproach and questioning bothers me.
And even though I am a foreigner, the foreign look of foreigners also bothers me.
I prefer to be alone with myself and somebody else's sons.

The room is pink.
When opening the door in the morning, I see a passageway illuminated by green and
yellow, with splashes of sunshine on the floor, on the doors, on the books on the shelf.
The morning twilight is filtered by curtains and towels, heating the objects with a dim
light.
The porcelain Snoopy gets a special throw of light, almost a spotlight.
At night the stairs are lilac, sparkling small squares on the wall.

My uncle got this apartment when he was working for the government, but as he
preferred living near the garden, he gave it to my parents.
I was 5 years old.
One day an employee of *CEHAB* came to investigate and regularize the residents. By
the family surname he recognized that he was my mother's nephew. They had not
seen each other for at least 30 years.

I live with my daughters, granddaughters and my new husband.
I think that I will live here until I die.
I have seen so many people coming and going, and today I drink beer alone for lack of company.

This time I thought it was fireworks, but they were real shots.
The motorcyclist did not fall and the police went after him.
Quickly the *pancadão* ceased to be funk and became *pow-pow* with a siren.
Here everything is still in peace.
Rice and *strogonoff*.
The water came back, the rain stopped.
The telephone rang and good news arrived.
Ever since I have moved into this house, when the phone rings I receive good news.

Today I was told I make family everywhere.
In the beginning of the artistic residency I could not imagine this would happen.
To feel welcomed does not necessarily mean to have friends.
Today I left the house that gave me back so many things I have lost.
I had to leave and embrace and cry and hurt.
I had to promise to myself that this love that was born in such a short time would not cease with my departure.
I will come back for Christmas.
I will come back to that corridor which was as much a home as my own home.
I will come back to the warmth of the stories packed with laughs and shouts.

Yesterday I saw an album of old photographs.
I could see the genetic similarity of the people and the permanence of the same *cobogó* from the corridor.
Now I am homeless, but back to a cozy bedroom with no outside communication beyond the noise of a busy urban street in Botafogo.
I am back to comfortable arms that stayed asleep here.
I close my eyes and a child's face comes back from my memories.
I smile.
They said they would call me to see if I had arrived safely.
It is difficult to answer such a question in a moment in which I have conquered so much and gotten so emotional, but I leave behind something very powerful.
No magic could make those days be longer.
The photographs that I took will serve as another album for another conversation in 20 years from now, maybe mine, theirs or ours.
They will serve as a map to take me back to that place and sweeten my memory.
Each *Juquinha* candy will take me to the hiding place, the green apple-shaped pot, where I will meet that happiness.

Lots of fireworks.
Some artificial, some real.
The forest was entirely burned.
Instead of green, now it is black.
A kite flies really high and after I spot the first one, dozens are already dancing in the sky.
Today is a day of celebration.

Codfish balls in many homes.
Families work and celebrate at the same time.
I returned to the enchanted corridor and met friends.
Even the 5 year old learned how to write "affection" with wooden chopsticks.
The couches and new curtains arrived.
The living room lights up from the recent tonalities.
A place is inaugurated.
The children help with the cleaning, but unintentionally wet the flannel.
The forgotten key on the gate gives entry to the less present ones.
Today is a day of celebration.
New clothes had their debut.
One person's fridge holds the others beer.
I brought bread pudding.
Latinha, Latinha! It is time to feed the cat.
Comes and goes, enters and leaves.
New sandals.
Feliz-da-vidá.

[Translated by Thais Medeiros]