



PERPÉTUA

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The first sensation Perpétua felt upon arriving in Manaus was suffocation. She was carrying a small suitcase, which was bordering on a bundle, stuffed with clothes already worn out from use as well as the bit of makeup she always put on, despite her poverty. She felt a threatening shudder of regret pass through her the moment she realised that her back was dripping with sweat and that she was finding it difficult to breathe, as if her lungs were in outer space, in a strange place not meant for humans. She was a bit shocked, seeing as she thought she was already familiar with the heat and the haze – she who had been raised in the Brazilian backlands, watching cattle die of thirst because there was no water, where the ground cracked and the soles of feet thickened.

On the first day of her new life, she allowed herself a late afternoon stroll. The zoo would have been empty if it weren't for her and the few animals that were there dozing off, perhaps out of boredom or owing to the heat. A zoo in the middle of the forest is a curious thing. It is as if the animals were humans: looking out the window at all the life passing by them. There was a forest silence, a near-silence: there was hissing, the small, measured callings of the macaws, the heavy breathing of a jaguar, indifferent, avoiding eye contact. She attempted to look into the eyes of the jaguar to understand what it must be like living without having to be accountable to an owner, but the jaguar wasn't paying any attention, it even seemed like it had conformed to such a system. Perpétua listened to the sound of her feet as she walked across the ground of beaten earth and felt resigned upon seeing two white-bellied monkeys sat cross-legged, thinking about nothing.

She had arrived only a few hours ago from the countryside of Ceará. A weight bared down on her, caused by the humidity and the bright colours that were hurting her eyes, still accustomed to the aridity of the Inhamuns region – the mud's drowsy tones spattered with the lifeless green of the backlands. Her being out-of-place contaminated the air; the macaws began to squawk. The calm of their evening was being disturbed by Perpétua, as if she had brought the bad omen of drought with her. That evening, for the first time in her life, she sensed the hidden forces of the forest that, even today and all this time later, make her feel like she's being swept by a powerful current into a universe where time stands still – the universe that only exists in the past, with the immense wilderness and high landscape never failing to show Perpétua just how small and insignificant she is. She then realised how death could come about in an instant and how the world, which brimmed with so much life, wouldn't even notice if she ceased to exist.



After two days, she began to notice how the sunlight's copper colour tainted everything with blood; it was a hindered light, and so different from the dazzling clarity of the sun in Ceará. The bright, golden yellow, the light that burned skin and dried out the foliage and laid everything bare, was missing here. The sun rises red in Manaus, coming up through the treetops and making blood stains on any pockets of sky that can still be seen between the leafy branches – the colour of a tragedy. She watched the sun rise in the red image reflected in the river of the forest. She'd never imagined that one day she would be living straddled above water, hearing during the watch-out of a night's light sleep the sound of fishes slipping over each other in the depths of that infinite river, more infinite than the sea, which Perpétua had never seen but knew to be big. She'd never understood why only she could hear the movements of the fish swimming beneath the surface – she who was born in the arid backlands, watching cattle languish from thirst year after year.

Best not to go in the water, got fish in there that eat humans, a boatman had told her on one of her first days in the stilt house and when she was still unaccustomed to being surrounded by so much water that washed up against her life and watered down her thoughts. Each night, she would dream that the constant heavy rain weakened the fragile planks of wood that made up the floor, through the gaps of which it was possible to see the river flowing during the day. In her nightmare, her bed would become submerged and get carried away by the current. There'd be no time for her to cry out, only feel the slimy movement of fishes getting mixed up with the water as they swam down her throat. She awoke sweating from the heat and restless from how lonely it was in that empty bed, her husband absent and rowing across the river to work. A man who she had met in Ceará and who had brought her to live with him in this place that was on the brink of flooding, always embarking for work, more distant than close by, more of a stranger than company.

I only know how to live on the water, Perpétua, let's get out of this place, rain is harder to come by here than a miracle of Jesus... And so they left the backlands of the Inhamuns and headed for the state of Amazonas.

For every fifteen days at work, he spent two resting in the house. He'd come back horny, undressing Perpétua with the haste of a famished, uncaged animal. He held her eagerly, biting the neck of his wife while she moaned in great pleasure, indifferent to the creatures that moved about in the water below their mattress. Years passed without Perpétua getting pregnant, her womb hindered by the absence of her husband. On the really difficult days, she imagined that the babies Miguel made inside her came down with the rain to fill empty eggs that the fish then carried to the shrubbery of the riverbank. Insidious and demonic beasts, ripping all promises to shreds.



It was a day in September that had dawned red and gave no sign of rain. The day his boat would return; she prepared the food just how her husband liked it. But Miguel didn't come back, and no one knew of his whereabouts. Two weeks passed without any news, and Perpétua feared the worst. She preferred to believe that he had succumbed to sexual temptation, that he carried the scent of another woman's perfume. She asked her neighbour for help, went to search for the boss, although she hardly knew his name, any piece of information that might help her to remain hopeful that they'd find him, dead or alive. Who knows, maybe he had run away with some woman he'd come across at a port buried deep inside the forest.

She didn't get any answers. She retired into the stilt house and imagined the child she was yet to have with Miguel, its eyes wide and skin darkened by the sun. She would give birth to a river baby that knew all the water's secrets. She mulled over this period of waiting that had no end date. Whilst cutting an onion without a single tear in her eye, the neighbour brought her the news that a man's body had been found not far from them, floating in the river. There was no need to hurry, he made a point of saying, as the police had already recovered the remains, but only after the TV crew had finished making a report about the body infested with fishes, all coming out of its guts.

"Have you heard of the candiru, dear? It's a tiny fish, this big. Don't forget what I told you, here we've got fish that eat humans!"

He helped her find her way to the mortuary. Resigned and trembling, Perpétua was led to a room to recognise the corpse. She stood for some minutes in front of the white sheet that covered a drowned and swollen body and didn't know how she would remain standing. She had to wait for the assistant, a small, waistcoated man who went on to pull back the sheet with a dry, merciless gesture, revealing the head and torso. There, Miguel, the ugly tattoo she had never liked, a creature with beady eyes like a cobra stamped onto his arm now eaten out by the candirus.

She saw how the miniscule fishes had ruined his body and vomited from the nausea. For a moment she believed she was going to faint, feeling her insides turn as if they too were riddled with tiny, slippery fishes that were still alive. There was no water within her that could line her eyes with tears. She returned home having vowed that the body be shortly released for burial.

The sleep that came to her that night was distorted by the tablet that her neighbour had given her with fingers that smelt of fish — they carried the stench of death, which is what everything that dies in the forest smells of, lying out in the open until it has decomposed and nourished the soil. She had awoken from



a dream within a dream, covered in sweat, sensing the currents shake the foundations of the house as if the river was simmering. She felt the wet hand of a man rest on top of her stomach and the hand was cold. For a moment, she didn't have the courage to look sideways, fearing the presence of Miguel's drowned body, his rough palm caressing her womb made infertile under the water's curse. When she finally turned her head, she saw his blue-green body sleeping next to her, stewed by the river that now permeated every part of it, rotting the flesh and loosening nails from fingers, hairs from arms. The enormous head of a fish gawped at her with its fixed aquatic stare of two unblinking black balls, nor caring nor suffering, and mouth wide open, moving as if it were ready to demolish her whole, carrying her away into the bloody river where the sun that rises is but the announcement of a new death.