

HOME GAME

Um poema de Haj Ross

Late afternoon, the Saturday soccer game
Silvinho's sítio, in the hills outside Atibaia
I am visiting my wife's cousin's family
Ze Cocco and his son-in-law Mano are players,
forward and goal, ataque e goleiro.

"Wander around, fique a vontade"
I walk past ponds, chickens, through sheep,
open a gate of planks, pass into a meadow
the signs of city, even farm, recede.
I stand on the bank of the river.

It has swirled against hard red clay
more centuries than there are words for
the current and soil know each other's measure
they are ready to outstay us, a deep logic
rimmed with reeds, who knows their names.

I follow its low song, along high bank
through butterflies, a black and white beetle
on red orange yellow blossoms: so tiny!

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I step carefully, cows have been here
maybe snakes, though still I hear traffic.

The silence of woods calls to me.
Trees hung with streamers of pale moss
quiet in sunshine, no breeze
the bark covered with miniscule plants
it is too hot not to try growing everywhere.

On one trunk, a brown structure of mud
two and a half feet long, a dime-sized hole
at the top, one black marimbondo as sentinel
another buzzes past to join perhaps hundreds
Translation: hornets build with mud here.

I swing past slowly, into the dark canopy
on the lookout for anything, watching leaves
listening for birds, I know what I want
to feel the ancient pulse, before villages,
the same beat of heart as in Canadian woods.

Two ruts of a road meander the river,
there are crude platforms for fishing,
empty bottles, pails, abandoned bamboo,
truck tires, no one will pick up here,
this is an edge. The sun sinks low behind me.

A spider, its body the size of a child's finger,
hangs in mid-air, web invisible, no chance

for her prey to spot it, this is her realm
between dark bark, dry leaves, brown water.
I look at the opposite bank: who lives there?

No voice answers, there are dues to be paid.
To outwait these trees is the work
of generations, shrewd lookers who hunted here
or who learned how to farm. I can ask,
but know enough to expect no reply.

I retrace my steps, return to Brasil
to fences, rusting barrels, two dogs,
past orange trees, the house and cars,
up cement stairs to the yells of futebol
from the small field cut into the hillside.

Two teams of friends, red shirts and white
grimly, laughingly, pay homage to the art
of foot and head. Beautiful shots, saves,
passes behind backs, the goalie cries,
"Marcação! Cover him! Vamos lá let's go!"

Serious fun, no quarter asked, but for injuries,
the others wait for the one on the ground,
wisecracks are the balm for the kicked shin,
the twisted ankle, strained knee, it continues
with careful roughness, there is a next game to think of.

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Sweating, insults, curses, beer and barbecue
call for an end, one team has won, there are jeers,
panting, shirts are off, this game is history,
the flashes of brilliance these men have worked for
are the seed of the great teams of tomorrow,

those one may see on TV, far from these hinterlands
linked to dust, these dogs, two young boys
taking shots at the goal while someone retrieves
the other ball from the bushes. This dance of men
rises from deepest rivers in these mountains.

Back at the house, quick showers, TV blaring,
Palmeiros vs. Santos, Cruzeiro vs. Vasco,
tall cold brown bottles, drinking, shouting,
the meat, beer-marinated, goes onto the grill,
a card game, truco, begins, is fought fiercely,

rough jokes, banter about manhood, taunts,
six lines of talk, now five, no maybe eight,
I catch snippets, the whole incomprehensible,
mysterious cards are flung onto the table,
this is men doing men among men,

only the jokes change from here to Brooklyn,
Kenya, Tokyo, Berlin, Sumatra, Perth.
No girls allowed, though maybe yearned for
I am adopted into the family of beer,
work ended, the sizzle of meat on flames

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then wrapped in rolls, no napkins, placemats.
I cannot help grinning, this lingo I speak
with no words. Home far from home,
I am given a place at the table, glasses
and cards slam down, into the evening.

Haj Ross
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Mistywood