

## In Brasilia

As my forehead pushes up against the foggy plastic, looking out, I am reminded of something that I was once told: that before planes' windows had rounded corners, they cracked, which resulted in spontaneous combustion mid-flight.

Don't think about flying. The human mind struggles to conceive the thought of it. Our primordial brains grappling with the idea of a vast chunk of aluminium in the sky is too much. Consuming gallons upon gallons of fuel, a hungry beast. A mirror of life.

Planes have no moment to reflect. No pause. They're either on or off. If this plane were to stop right now, freeze in mid-air, we would drop like a stone and smash into the arid land below exploding in a ball of flames. An immediate pyre, no time for ceremony.

"How are you getting there?"

"I'm flying"

"That's ridiculous"

She was right, this is the opposite of flying, my knees are digging into the seat in front of me. I had already lost the fight for the armrest. Flight implies freedom, unbounded movement, birds fly. I had been sitting for hours cooped up in this metal tin, I don't feel like reading, I am too agitated. I stare at the safety instructions on the back of the headrest in front of me, I have been on countless flights and can't remember what to do in the event of a crash. What's the point? No one will survive anyway, especially over water. I can recall just one commercial jet that managed it, US Airways Flight 1549, colliding into New York's Hudson River, everyone was rescued. They made a motion picture about it. Finally, I see the hostess walking over with my tea and miniature milk, I know I won't enjoy it, but it will pass the time. As I catch her eye, the blood suddenly drains from her face as a loud bang splits the air. The plane depressurises. Oxygen masks drop. We veer off to the right and plummet towards the ground, flipping and spinning, perpetual rotation. Screams pierce my ear drums. Tinnitus. I knew it was coming. The end. What is the word for this? Certainly not flying.

My brain flicks in and out of focus. Occasionally seeing the outline of the plane shaped city below.

Sometimes I feel like my life is like that of a plane, what will happen to me if I stop?

I'm a restless child on the landing strip, stationary. In adolescence I start moving down the runway, I take off, hurtling to a known, yet, unknown destination. I start to descend, I hit the deck.

'You have arrived at your destination'

That's it, the end of life, I guess. Was that glorious? Or a quagmire of tedium? Best not to reflect on these things too much, it will wear you down.

As it happens, I had arrived at my destination. 'Welcome to Brasilia'.

I wander out of my characterless business hotel, down a characterless street, past characterless shops, light bounces off vacant windows, as vacant cars wait to enter vacant malls. I check my watch. The second hand creeps around the blank face edging me on with every tick while I linger in the shade. I am directionless. Finally, I find myself on the city's main avenue, a field of tarmac; 16 lanes wide with a wasteland of grass in the centre.

Sweat trickles into my eyes. It stings. I forgot my suncream.

Crossing the road is a thankless task. I seem confined to this side of the city forevermore. I give up. I get in a taxi. As we glide down the expansive road, it hits me; this city wasn't designed for people, it was designed as a concept, an idea, a dream made physical. A central axis contains the government and business districts with two residential wings attached. I am in the fuselage headed for the cockpit. Born in the age of the motorcar, this city doesn't care for walkers. But I love to walk. I was told that Darwin walked in order to think. Walking without destination, the mind can breathe and without destination the unexpected can happen. Our minds and bodies are connected, unified as one. We try to separate them, privilege one over the other, yet this is a futile task. As my body moves, blood is pumped through my veins and into my brain, feeding oxygen into my thoughts. My mind is freed into an expansive plain, let loose to wonder the streets, drifting from abstraction to image.<sup>1</sup>

What's the point in doing something if you already know the outcome?<sup>2 3</sup>

I know.

But there is nothing that I know.<sup>4</sup>

We pull up at the National Congress. Two monolithic towers, blocks of white stone, flanked by a dish and a dome which sit on a slender plinth of glass and concrete. Stable. Grounded. Ascending skywards, defiant.

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<sup>1</sup> Thinking is at odds with sense which 'traverses the five senses, the sense of direction, common sense, semantic sense, divinatorial sense, sentiment, moral sense, practical sense, aesthetic sense, all the way to that which makes possible all these senses', as when sense appears and such an 'ecstasy takes places, it offers merely, instantaneously, the void of truth'. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*.

<sup>2</sup> 'Joy, jouissance, to come, have the sense of birth: the sense of the inexhaustible imminence of sense'. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth To Presence*.

<sup>3</sup> 'History repeats itself, in part because the genome repeats itself. And the genome repeats itself, in part because history does. The impulses, ambitions, fantasies, and desires that drive human history are, at least in part, encoded in the human genome.' Siddhartha Mukherjee, *The Gene: An Intimate History*.

<sup>4</sup> 'Our ability to read out this sequence of our own genome has the makings of a philosophical paradox. Can an intelligent being comprehend the instructions to make itself? — John Sulston Scholars.

Perfectly still water stretches out in front, a dark mirror of reality, reflecting the world above. Which world are we in?

I'm not too sure.

A constant series of new dawns, promises of a brighter future, all with the same message; to make the country 'great', and now echoing sentiments from America - to make the country great 'again'. As the sun starts to peak and shade becomes scarce, I see a man that has partially found some. Penumbra. Sitting on bleached white steps, he wonders, 'what is greatness' as his eyes move up to the sky. The power of nationalist myth is strong, glamourising the past to build a nostalgic present. The tides of politics are always turning, looking forwards, looking back. He questions; 'what could this greatness could consist of? The sun is surely great, yet Muhammad Ali is considered the greatest. A boxer with no rival. Is that greatness?' He puts his headphones in. He plays the Beatles, 'Tomorrow Never Knows' floats into his ears, he thinks how great they are. 'Turn off your mind relax and float down stream – It is not dying, It is not dying. Lay down all thoughts, surrender to the void – It is shining.' He remembers Lennon learning the greatness of the teachings within Tibetan Buddhism. What was that quote? "What is born will die, What has been gathered will be dispersed, What has been accumulated will be exhausted, What has been built up will collapse, And what has been high will be brought low." That's it. Can anything be great? What of this place? A relic of a faded dream, a future that never was.

I pass rows upon rows of stark buildings. Two cameras slung around my neck, I'm looking, but what am I looking for? I want to capture this city, but what am I capturing?<sup>5</sup> I photograph endless windows, rusting air conditioning units and deserted pavements. A still moment in time. The difference between digital and analogue is not the end result but the process. Analogue photography is alchemy, the bringing together of chemicals and the reaction of light. Tangible matter. The digital is something else. Inconceivable.

Brain shuts down.

What is this feeling? I know I have felt it before. There it is; I'm standing in an airport, alone. In transit.<sup>6</sup> It's late at night, desolate, all the planes have gone except mine. Endless glossy floors, empty chairs and shuttered shops. Down the rabbit hole. Here in solace I find peace. I'm alone, yet, invisibly connected to the whole world, just not right now, but I will be, flight paths and radio waves will energise when the sun starts to rise. A manifold in dormancy. I hate delays.<sup>7 8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 'The functional units, the highly structured, programmed, and controlled spaces in the contemporary city, mean to threaten the city's crucial characteristics, namely openness and unpredictability.' Kenny Cupers, Markus Miessen, and Wendy James, *Spaces of Uncertainty*.

<sup>6</sup> 'The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude.' Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*.

<sup>7</sup> 'Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable.' 'the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications.' Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*.

<sup>8</sup> '[...] the real non-places of supermodernity - the ones we inhabit when we are driving down the motorway, wandering through the supermarket or sitting in an airport lounge waiting for the next flight to London'. Augé, *Non-Places*.

I can feel time collapsing and expanding, it envelopes and repels, static moving debris. Magnetism. Poles interlocked. Just as I comprehend time, the past, present and future fold into one another rupturing my understanding of time itself. I am nowhere but always somewhere, I am located through my understanding of what I understand, yet this is shattered by the prism from which I look. Elusive rays of colour can shine onto and through me. Through chronological time I can understand a before and after, the time before, becomes the after. The before is projected into the future, as I do not have any awareness of what has not come. So my memory of the past becomes the future which is created in the present.

Solitary cleaners in tall black waders pull dead leaves from rectangular pools of water. Ripped fabric drapes over their necks, offering scant protection from the sun. As they move, ripples expand outwards from their legs in a state of mutual recognition. It's easy to romanticise about a simple existence, I often think of living in the mountains, off grid. Sadly, I know my restless body won't allow it, I would convulse in stagnancy, slowly suffocating from the internal deceit of knowing that I was not being true to myself. Through travel there is a sense of knowing, an understanding gained through the body; the smells, the space, the sounds, the movement.<sup>9 10</sup>

Hidden behind municipal buildings are layers of parked cars, traces of people, entrails. Debris. No, the detritus of the civil service. The cogs of a political system in transition. When the tyres stop, another machine gets moving. I find a food truck and a lean-to shelter with a man selling fruit. An oasis of abundance. A crack in the system. A glitch in the matrix. Life always seeps through eventually. A solitary dandelion through a crumbling brick wall.

Perhaps we can call it hope.

Or delusion.

Is the faded dream embodied in this city responsible for the emergence of the far-right?<sup>11 12</sup> Fuelled by a retired military officer with dark dreams. How exhausting it must be to live with such hatred. Flaking white paint falls off modernist buildings as embers of discontent, creating fertile soil for the seeds of radical thought.

Over time the brain filters out trauma through the process of sleep. Self-preservation that makes our lives look wonderful in hindsight. Is this happening globally? Through the power of collective thought are we able to erase the negatives from the past and stoke anger within the present. Blaming our own ills on external

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<sup>9</sup> 'Man dwells when he can orientate himself within and identify himself with an environment, or, in short, when he experiences the environment as meaningful.' Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci. Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*.

<sup>10</sup> 'Sense is concrete: that is, it is tangible and impenetrable (these two attributes mutually imply each other)' Nancy, *The Sense of the World*.

<sup>11</sup> The 'timeless task of architecture is to create embodied and lived experiential metaphors that concretize and structure our being in the world' Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*.

<sup>12</sup> 'The image is intimate. For it makes of our intimacy an exterior power which we suffer passivity. Outside of us, in the ebb of the world which is causes, there trails, like glistening debris, the utmost depth of our passions.' Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*.

factors, or successive recent governments' inability to redistribute wealth and address the complexities of identity within the tidal wave of globalisation.<sup>13</sup>

Life, hidden, tucked away from the triumphalism of Niemeyer's monuments which are carelessly scattered in desolate fields of cracking concrete. 'See me', they say.<sup>14</sup> Yet, within these plains I too become abstract, a static figurine without bearing or locator. A fleeting marker on a plan, a cursory annotation.

Still.

Standing under a flyover where the wings of the city meet the fuselage.<sup>15</sup> A transport interchange, a tangled mess. A bus terminal, a train station and tarmac junction amalgamate into one.<sup>16</sup> Size matters. Out of nothingness I find a thronging whirr of people as bees around nectar.

I have emerged from the wilderness and found life.

A babble of voices contrasts against the silence that had consumed me. My cameras are safe. Lines of people waiting to be distributed around the city, parts on an assembly line. I want to ask them questions about their life. I dare not.

He steps onto the bus while trying not to make eye contact with familiar faces. He doesn't have the energy, not now.<sup>17</sup> He wants to be home, sit down and check out. Fade into oblivion while muttering meaningless platitudes to his family. What was the point?<sup>18</sup> His eyelids are heavy, slowly closing, then jolting open with every halt. The pistons roar. He hates that sound. He rouses as the bus judders up to his stop. Eyes fixed on the floor as he walks, the red dust had turned his shoes red, typical. He had just shined them. What a waste of time. Walking through apartment blocks he hopes he doesn't bump into anyone. He gives a half hearted wave to the porter, who doesn't notice - his eyes are firmly fixed on the daily paper. Up the stairs he

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<sup>13</sup> 'The nationalist is a curse because through his very nationalistic, patriotic spirit, he is creating a wall of isolation. He is so identified with his country that he builds a wall against another. What happens when you build a wall against something? That something is constantly beating against your wall.' Jiddu Krishnamurti, *The First and Last Freedom*.

<sup>14</sup> 'It seems that the entire destiny of architecture has always been colonization, the imposing of limits, order, form, the introduction into strange space of the elements of identity necessary to make it recognizable, identical, universal. Pertaining to the very essence of architecture is its condition as an instrument of organization, of rationalization, of productive efficiency capable of transforming the uncivilized into the cultivated, the fallow into the productive, the void into the built. How can architecture act in the terrain vague without becoming an aggressive instrument of power and abstract reason?' Ignasi De Sola-Morales Rubio, 'Terrain Vague,' in *Anyplace*.

<sup>15</sup> The M25 motorway, or London Orbital was seen as 'a spatial analog for the rave's psychedelic/amphetamine fantasy of timelessness, the limitless trance-dancing, and the relentless rhetoric of the "eternal."' Joshua Clover, 'The Second Summer of Love.' 1989: *Bob Dylan Didn't Have This to Sing About*.

<sup>16</sup> 'we can contrast the realities of transit (transit camps or passengers in transit) with those of residence or dwelling; the interchange (where nobody crosses anyone else's path) with the crossroads (where people meet); the passenger (defined by his destination) with the traveller (who strolls along his route)'. Auge, *Non-Places*.

<sup>17</sup> 'In man's attachment to life there is something stronger than all the ills in the world. The body's judgement is as good as the mind's and the body shrinks from annihilation.' Camus, *The Myth Of Sisyphus*.

<sup>18</sup> 'We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking. In that race which hastens us towards death, the body maintains its irreparable lead.' Camus, *The Myth Of Sisyphus*.

reaches for his keys. He pauses, savours the moment, finally he slides the jagged metal into the lock, yet his hand does not turn.

I catch sight of my taxi. A black Honda. I stick my hand out and give a cursory wave. I find a street on the map and show it to my driver. I don't really know why I chose this one. I guess I liked the look of it from above. Large clustered blocks, perfect.<sup>19</sup> An egalitarian utopia. I love maps. We cross through the crust of hotels and business blocks into the purlieu. Appearing before me; angular forms cresting through a verdant canopy. Mother earth birthing modernism.

I walk down a pathway, I'm on the inside. A secret community. Undercover.

My face slams against a tree and the bark grazes my face. Blood rises to the surface and trickles out as cold handcuffs rip into my wrists. My arms pushed up into my back. Voices shout commands into my ears. Incomprehensible. Languages have never been a strength of mine. I crane my head back to see sunlight piercing through the viridescent leaves above. I close my eyes. Darkness.

It's pleasant here, a subdued hush fills the air. The back of my neck has started to sting, the sun hasn't been kind. Each apartment block is lifted off the ground, perched on concrete blades which delicately touch carpets of glistening black stone. I amble through curved pathways and over patches of watered grass. Not a person in sight. I lie down on a simple white bench, I could drift off into delicious slumber.<sup>20</sup>

At what moment does it all go wrong? The disconnect from intention to reality? From politics to person? The utopian vision that imbues deep foundations, now lying in a plume of voluminous dust while the architecture stands unshaken. Existing now as an embodiment of mankind's failure. A mausoleum of faded dreams. In memoriam.<sup>21</sup> What if slums and luxury condominiums were replaced by the same concept that

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<sup>19</sup> 'Its modernist superquadras promised to create an egalitarian residential model where various social classes would intermingle.' Sophia Beal, *The Real and Promised Brasilia: An Asymmetrical Symbol in 1960s Brazilian Literature*.

<sup>20</sup> 'In the concrete reality of today's world, places and spaces, places and non-places intertwine and tangle together. The possibility of non-place is never absent from any place. Place becomes a refuge to the habitue' of non-places'. Auge, *Non-Places*.

<sup>21</sup>

Dark house, by which once more I stand  
Here in the long unlovely street,  
Doors, where my heart used to beat  
So quickly, waiting for a hand,

A hand that can be clasp'd no more—  
Behold me, for I cannot sleep,  
And like a guilty thing I creep  
At earliest morning to the door.

He is not here; but far away  
The noise of life begins again,  
And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain  
On the bald street breaks the blank day.

Lord Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam*.

birthed these buildings? Is ruin destiny? Wilting under a cynical gaze, ready to grasp the cold usurious fingers of the *Man*?

Yes.

Stick it to the *Man*.<sup>22</sup>

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I am an anti-Christ

*I am an anarchist*

*Don't know what I want but I know how to get it*

*I wanna destroy the passerby*

Sex Pistols, *Anarchy in the U.K.*