

# CATS & WIRES

a journal about 'Gato'

*Gato*, literally translated as 'cat', has different meanings. It can refer to a beautiful girl (*gata*) or beautiful boy (*gato*), but is also Brazilian slang for the illegal practice of pirating public services such as water, electricity and the internet. Many people living in favelas pirate electricity by tapping their wires into a nearby street lamp. The same system is sometimes used to illegally access the internet. You are probably in a favela if you see a blue plastic water tank on the roof of a house. These tanks are the terminus of an endless network of plastic tubes leading from a public water service point, sometimes nearby and sometimes far away.

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# White Snakes

## Gato

They're all over the place. First you don't see any of them, but once you've noticed one, and then another one... it's hard 'not to see' them. I discovered the first one when I was standing at the top of the stairs, on the very top of the hill. I was looking out at the urban landscape, still breathing hard from climbing up the steep path. It was a winter day, early morning, and you could feel from the air that it was going to be a beautiful day. The sun had just risen and was spreading its first rays of light. It was the sun's reflection on the shiny white plastic skin of 'one of them' that caught my attention. My eyes re-focused from landscape to macro and started scrutinizing the shape of this strange creature. It had a stretched-out body shaped like a stiff worm, no arms, no legs. The head and tail looked identical. It was hard to tell if it was moving from left to right or from right to left. Was it even moving? Moving slowly, or standing still? Maybe it was even dead. Although it was pure white, there was a kind of ugliness in this plastic snake. The sound of a helicopter distracted me, and when I looked again at the spot where I'd seen the creature, I saw more reflections and realized there were a lot more of these ugly strangers hiding on the hill. In fact, they were all over the place. Hordes of them.

They were all different shapes. Big, sturdy ones and thin, graceful ones. Which were the females? Some were short, some were long and some were very long. They were all going somewhere, but in different directions. Some of them were going uphill, others downhill. Some were lined up next to each other, some on top of each other, some crossing over each other. They were all secretly connected and, as such, took over the entire neighborhood.

Mostly they were sliding over the path. Some were attached to the red brick walls, scaling the roofs, sticking up in the air, going down stairs. Eventually, they all ended up in one of the blue plastic water tanks decorating the field of rooftops. It was the point where the network ended. The place where they felt safe. The spot where they stopped to release their body fluids. A place where they guarded their most precious secret.

When I realized what they were actually concealing in those blue containers, I began to appreciate that the contribution of these ugly creatures was a matter of life and death for the community living on the hill. **(Repórter sem Fronteiras)**

*White Snakes*, from: *Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos* Archive: 'White Snakes', *Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos*, October 28, 2010. This article is based on living and working in the Fogueira favela in Rio de Janeiro, July & August 2010.





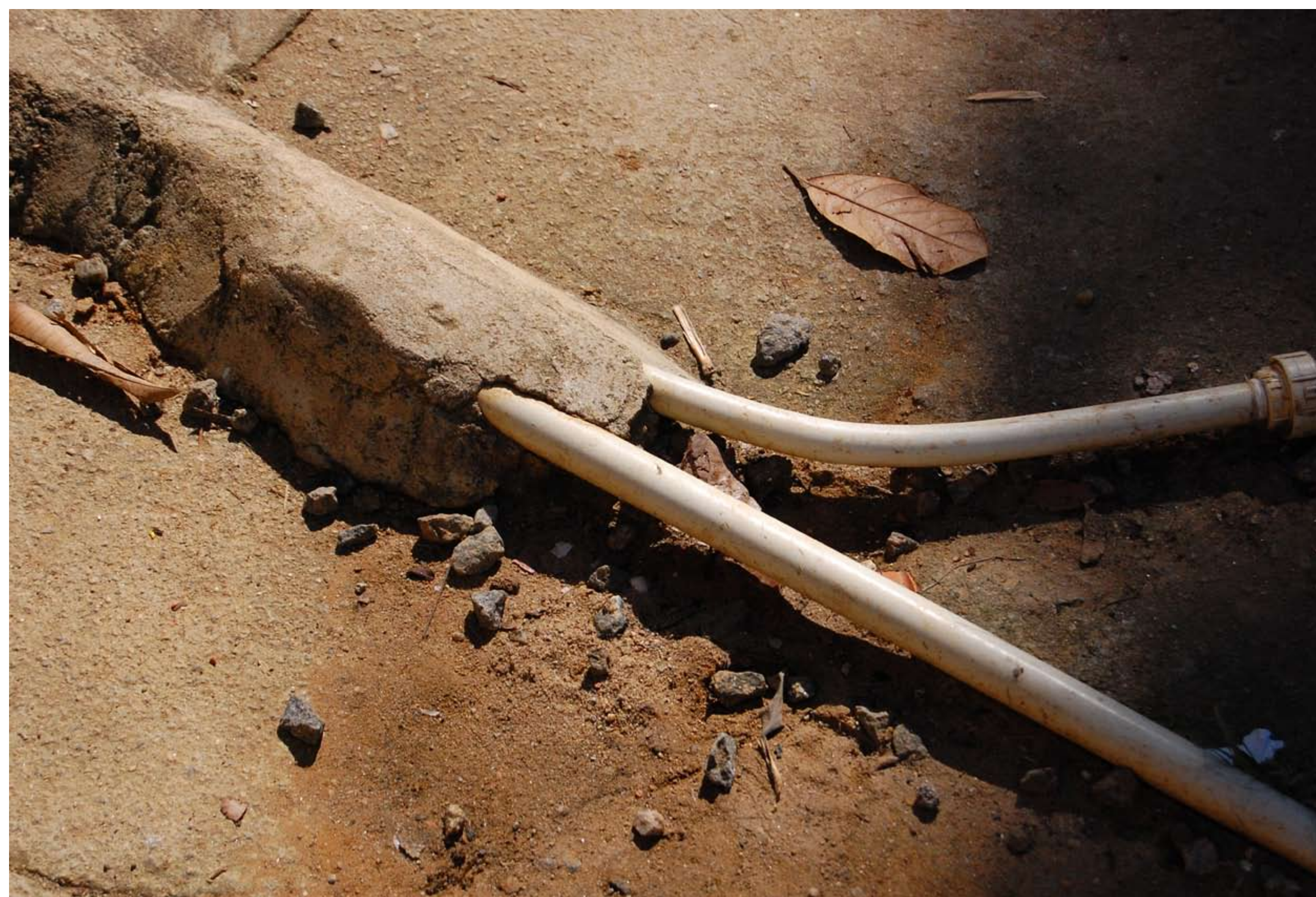


## Cobra Gato

What began as a light shower quickly accelerated into a major downpour as the pattering of raindrops grew louder on the thin metal roof. I hadn't even noticed it was raining and was certainly not concerned. Not so with Tininha. Her ear was trained. The sound of raindrops had set off an alarm bell somewhere in her brain. She stopped talking with me and sprang into action. She ran out of the house and came back in with a massive vinyl garden hose. She maneuvered it like a hunter who had just snared a cobra, dragging it across the room, hoisting it over the sofa and nearly knocking over a table, across the floor and into the kitchen. There she proceeded to force the head of the unwieldy beast into a hole in the brick on the counter next to the sink. Within a minute, a steady stream of brown water, mud and stones came gushing out of its mouth. The rain and sudden availability of water had transformed Tininha's mood. I couldn't imagine being happy about doing dishes, but I guess she felt relieved to finally having water to wash the collection of dirty pots and pans, plates, bowls, cups and saucers that had sat for days, waiting for rain, in three large plastic tubs. The dishes and various utensils had been both home and food source to an army of nasty, aggressive flies. I hoped the rain would drive them away and give us some peace, if only for a little while. (Repórter sem Beiras)

*Cobra*, from: *Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos* Archive: 'Cobra', *Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos*, October 28, 2010. This article is based on an interview with Tininha – living and working in Jardim Gramacho, Rio de Janeiro, August 2010.







## Leaky Bill

Gato

I've been walking around in circles for fifteen minutes now. The tedium of this looping parcours is beginning to affect me. After every thirty loops, I move on to another spot a few paces away — all the while keeping tabs on the subway exit. I continue like this for what seems ages. Finally, I notice two legs walking quickly in my direction; two legs coming straight towards me. My brain sounds an alarm. I snap to attention and recognize it's Ana. Her face is tense, her smile is forced; she's excusing herself for being late. It's her boss's fault. He made her work late. There was no time to go home, change clothes, eat. She complains as she wobbles on those gorgeous, much-too-high, spike heels. On the way to the pub she keeps talking about how she dislikes her job and boss, and complaining about how expensive Ipanema is. She has no time to go on holiday or for what she calls 'leisure and pleasure'. She looks very fragile in those too-high heels, so I slow down, me in my cheap comfy *Havaianas*.

She sips her cappuccino and sets the cup down on the saucer. Her carmine-red lipstick leaves a middle-class signature on the expensive white porcelain finish. As her hand leaves the handle of the porcelain design, she nervously grabs the large leather handbag and searches for something inside. She finds the document I've asked for and puts it on the table. A stark white A4-format sheet of paper that contrasts with the warmth of the dark-brown wooden table. It's her electricity and water bill. A carmen-red polished nail points to the column entitled 'public expenses'. Registered taxpayers — the middle-class of Rio i.e. all non-favela residents — receive a monthly invoice for private consumption of electricity and water, as well as public consumption of electricity and water. Public consumption includes electricity siphoned off the street lights in Rio's favelas. In other words, the middle-class taxpayers are the ones who end up paying for the thousands of *gatos* pirating electricity from the 'urban trees' in the city's greedy *barracos*. (Repórter sem Beiras)

**Leaky Bill**, from: *Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos* Archive: 'Leaky Bill', *Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos*, October 28, 2010. This article is based on spending time with Ana — living in Ipanema, Rio de Janeiro, July & August 2010.

*Barracos* — or shanties are the names given to the poorly-constructed dwellings in favelas.

*Gato* — is Brazilian slang for the illegal tapping of electricity from sources such as street lamps. It's used as well for stealing water or internet services.

*Havaiana's* — is a Brazilian brand of flip flops.







## Urban Trees

### Gato

It's too hot to enjoy the scenery. I am sweating my way up the five hundred steps towards the little *mercado* on top of the hill, my eyes focused on the rhythm of the stairs. The chirping of a bird suddenly captures my attention, and I jerk my head upwards towards a clear blue sky. In Gloria, I am used to seeing a sky filigreed with a few lonely white lines; jet streams from the airplanes taking off from nearby Aeroporto Santos Dumont. Planes flying to 'want-to-be destinations'. Here in Fogueiteira, the sky is a grid of signature black lines. A chaotic grid of electric wires, connected and ramified. Each of them going in another direction, each of them ending up at another destination: one of the nearby shanties. 'Gato! Gaaaaaaato!', a little girl shouts as she merrily skips past me, on her way down the hill. I move my head again, this time from high-up thoughts to the lower land of reality. She's calling a cat that seems to be taking a lazy afternoon nap; sheltering her dark-tinted fur from the hot burning sun in the shade of a nearby street light. Her dirty fur is as black as the nest of wires above her. The sly cat, pretending to sleep, doesn't react to the little girl's calls. As soon as she is gone, the cat re-opens its bright yellow eyes. They focus again on the unraveled ball of wool in front of her. The wool is the same color as her fur; as black as the nest of wires above. With a hesitating, lazy gesture she continues her play with the ball of yarn, pawing at the tangle of black woolen threads.

The hill in Fogueiteira is mapped with a labyrinth of narrow corridors and connecting stairways. There are few 'proper streets' here, and the only way to get around or access downtown *asfalto* is to hire a *mototaxi*. Because there are so few real streets, street lights too are in short supply. The few that exist look more like urban trees — big concrete trunks with a canopy of thick black wires branching out in every direction. Not only do these urban trees illuminate the streets at night, they are also a 24-hour source of energy for nearby families. Each wired branch that leaves the trunk, ends up in one of the neighboring shanties, supplying energy to power the 24-hour fridge, the 10-hour ventilator, the 9-hour radio, the 24-hour TV and, occasionally, the 24-hour lamp. (Repórter sem Beiras)

**Urban Trees**, from *Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos Archive: 'Urban Trees', Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos, October 28, 2010. This article is based on living and working in the Fogueiteira favela in Rio de Janeiro, July & August 2010.*

*Asfalto* — refers to asphalted i.e. paved streets. It's slang for indicating the places in Brazilian cities where the middle-classes live.

*Fogueiteira* — is the name of a small favela in the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro, close to the popular tourist quarter of Santa Theresa.

*Gato* — is Brazilian slang for the act of pirating i.e. illegal tapping of public services such as water, electricity and the internet.

*Gloria* — is a neighborhood in the city of Rio de Janeiro where lower-middle class people live, mostly in apartment blocks.

*Mercado* — is Brazilian Portuguese for 'supermarket'.

*Mototaxi* — are taxi drivers on motorbikes. The streets in the favelas (if there are any) are very narrow; too narrow to accommodate cars. Most favelas are situated on hilltops and taking a mototaxi is the only practical way of getting up or down.







## The 24-Hour Radio

Gato

Hallelujah! Haaaaallelujah! screams the radio. An ugly square box, its back panel missing, reveals a tangle of black wires with a metal hatrack-cum-antenna sticking out on top — a skeleton of what was probably a normal radio in its earlier days. Tininha had found it on the trash dump and brought it home. After a minor technical ‘operation’, it was added to the family’s eclectic collection of home furnishings. That was five years ago. It now sits proudly on top of an old armoire, piles of colored clothing spilling out of its shelves.

Since its ‘operation’, the radio has been possessed by the spirit of an Evangelical clergyman who shouts his message into the shanty, night and day, with the urgency of a sports commentator reporting on a football match.

Hallelujah! Haaaaallelujah! he shouts through the night. Santos Spiritus!, Deus! and other words I don’t understand. Tininha’s grandson is sleeping through the clamor. I close my eyes and pull the blanket over my head, trying to ignore the light shining from a naked bulb in the ceiling. I push my ear deep into the pillow to block out the other voices. It’s past midnight when Tininha comes in. She has just finished dinner and joins us in the bedroom. Tininha’s clapboard shanty has two rooms. The back room is where everyone sleeps. One bed is shared by Tininha, her youngest daughter and the son of her oldest daughter. A second bed is used by her son and his girlfriend. Tininha’s husband only uses the bed in the day time after he comes home from his night shift in the factory. An old towel embroidered with a teddy bear is stretched over the door frame and divides the bedroom from the main room. The ‘living room’ is about the same size as the bedroom and is where the family cooks, eats, works, talks and watches television. The toilet is located in a little quad outside the shack. After a while someone turns off the television in the next room and Luana, the youngest daughter, enters the room. She’s surprised to find me still awake and asks if she can turn off the light. ‘Sure!’, I say. ‘And, please, can you turn off the radio as well?’. Her reaction is one of alarm, as if what she’s been asked to do is not allowed. She glances hesitantly at the radio and turns down the volume just a bit. ‘Is this better?’, she asks. When I say yes, she switches off the light and starts up the fan and turns up the volume on the radio like it was before. I listen to the hum of the fan and hear Luana searching for an empty spot in the bed. And then I hear the voice again. The Holy Radio.

I wake up in the morning to the first rays of sunlight peeking through the chinks of the rough wooden planks of the walls of the shanty. A little brown bird has also found it’s way through one of the cracks. A shiver of freedom goes through my body. I feel happy again, like a kid on a summer morning, waking up and going straight from bed to play in the green garden and green forest. But suddenly I realize there is no green garden in Jardim Gramacho. Here the ‘garden’ is packed with foul-smelling trash. Heavy-laden trucks, coming from the city center, bring tons and tons of waste to be dumped in the front yard of this little community, living on the edge of the world’s biggest trash heap. It’s a different garden and a different playground for the children in Jardim Gramacho. Babies take their first steps in a field of empty cans, and suck away their hunger on dirty plastic cups. Older kids spend their days in the fields of waste by collecting material that can be recycled and exchanged for a few centavos. Their work is supervised by an army of aggressive flies. The flies, however, aren’t the only ones eating trash. Some of the food gets collected, sometimes even resold in a nearby food stall.

I lay in bed and wonder about the Holy Radio. About the zealous clergyman and his preaching, and what these people have to rejoice in. (Repórter sem Beiras)

**The 24-Hour Radio**, from: *Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos Archive: ‘The 24-Hour Radio’, Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos, October 28, 2010. This article is based on an interview with Tininha — living and working in Jardim Gramacho, Rio de Janeiro, August 2010.*

*Jardim Gramacho* — is one of the world’s largest landfills and is located on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro city. Next to the trash dump, people have erected illegal shanty settlements. Not only do these people live in the trash, they live off it as well. Families have started up small operations in their backyards where they recycle the trash coming from the city of Rio.







## High Voltage Monster

### Gato

If you come close enough to Tia Rose's face, you will notice a sprinkling of dark brown microscopic freckles. They shine like distant stars on the universe of her smiling cheeks. They are the marks of memories, some happy, some sad. One of the darker ones says 'November 10th'.

It was a day that began like any other. Rose woke up early and prepared the salty snacks. Fifty squares of fresh white cheese dipped in yellow batter and fried in gold. When they had cooled, she placed them in the silver, insulated cooler bag — together with cans of *Guarana* and other sugary drinks — and hoisted it to her shoulders. Then she took a *mototaxi* downhill towards *asfalto* where she sold her *salagados* on the street. Jesse, her son, went off to school and later in the afternoon would play *pipa* with his friends from the neighborhood. Isabelle, her daughter, went next door to a neighbor's house to play and watch television. Black cats are bad luck, though, and watching television can be dangerous. That morning, with no apparent warning, the ever-entertaining television set exploded. The colorful light turned into lights of fire. Isabelle did not survive the electric shock, and Rose hardly survived the loss of her daughter.

Isabelle is not the only victim of the 'High Voltage Monster'. The risky illegal business of tapping electricity from public street lamps has transformed many refrigerators, lamps, fans and other appliances into deadly killers. The 'High Voltage Monster' still strikes from time to time, and Rose's tears still fall. Sliding from freckle to freckle, leaving a wet trace on her chubby cheeks. The feeling of guilt is hard to get over. (Repórter sem Beiras)

**High Voltage Monster**, from: *Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos Archive: 'High Voltage Monster', Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos, October 28, 2010. This article is based on an interview with Tia Rose — living and working in the Fogueira favela, Rio de Janeiro, July 2010.*

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*Gato* — is Brazilian slang for the act of pirating i.e. illegal tapping of public services such as water, electricity and the internet.

*Guarana* — is the brand name of a Brazilian cola-like soft drink. It's made from the red Guarana berry that is found in the Amazon.

*Mototaxi* — are taxi drivers on motorbikes. The streets in the favelas (if there are any) are very narrow; too narrow to accommodate automobiles. Most favelas are situated on hilltops and taking a mototaxi is the only practical way of getting up and down.

*Pipa* — is the Brazilian word for 'kite'.

*Salgado* — is a typical Brazilian salty snack, a fried pastry filled with cheese, shrimp or minced meat.



**Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos** (*Journal of Unread Articles*) is a journal made by Repórter sem Beiras. Repórter sem Beiras (*Reporter without Boundaries*) is a self-initiated project by visual reporter Annelies Vaneycken. The project deals with the negative perception attributed to the communities living in favelas – Brazilian slums. It raises questions as to how a graphic designer can help break down this stereotype and communicate a broader view and sense of personal identity. As a follow-up to her research in the Brazilian slums, the reporter will publish monthly journals from her Reporter's Office at Recyclart Galery 7, and visualize stories that go beyond the typical clichés surrounding poverty and crime.

This issue, **Cats & Wires**, focuses on the *Gato* system used in favelas. *Gato*, literally translated as 'cat', has different meanings. It can refer to a beautiful girl, but is also Brazilian slang for the illegal practice of pirating public services such as water, electricity and the internet.

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