

THE DESTROYED ROOM

a journal about 'Rain'

It usually falls in tiny drops for long periods or brief intervals. It might also come as a shower and surprise for those who forgot their umbrellas. It's afraid of yellow and feels comfy in the green; it's a blessing for desert landscapes. Some cultures associate 'rain' with fertility, growth and life. For others, these beautiful transparent drops can mean destruction, chaos and loss ... *Floods and landslides kill 95 in Rio slums after city's worst rainstorm* (The Guardian, Wednesday 7 April 2010).

Brazilian favelas often appear in the international press in the aftermath of natural disasters caused by torrential rain. Their very location makes them vulnerable to landslides, mudslides and flooding. In this series, Repórter sem Beiras tells the trilogy of Bayano, who lost his house a year ago in a landslide on the Morro do Foqueteira, a favela in Rio de Janeiro.

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Waiting for Bayano

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Bayano is the kind of person who is always at home. He likes having people drop over unexpectedly. Just to say ‘hi’ or have a chat. But whenever I make an actual appointment to go visit him, he’s never there. It was one of those times. I had told him I’d come at 11. When I arrived and saw the door closed, I knew he was gone and I could either sit down and wait or go back home. I decided to wait. I sat down to rest on a solitary rock beside the *barraco*, overlooking the scenery from *Fogueteira’s* hilltop. Below were a cluster of haphazardly erected *barracos* that gradually faded into the regular urban grid of buildings at the bottom of the hill. I stared for a long time at this landscape of blurred shapes and colors. In the distance I could hear firecrackers, an announcement perhaps of a police raid, probably at *Morro de Prazer*, the neighboring hill. I anticipated the noise of a helicopter and shooting, but all I could hear was the sound of a barking dog, children playing, and music blaring from a neighbor’s house. I could smell burning plastic — someone was burning trash — there is no public garbage collection on the *morro*. It was approaching midday, the sun was getting stronger. I tried to cover my head in the shade of an old cracked wall. The shade formed a trapezoid-like carpet on the dusty soil. A curved line of ants kept me company.

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I first heard about ‘Bayano’ when I encountered his car somewhere in a lost corner of the *morro*. The rusty wreck of his old VW minibus had two flat tires. It made the car lean back against the wall beside it, like an old man trying to stand on tired skinny legs. The sharp glass splinters of its broken window didn’t seem to bother the children who played with the car as if it were a toy. Its pale surface, like the worn-out skin of an old man, showed spots of brown rust alongside spray-painted letters in fluorescent green that spelled ‘B A Y A N O’.

Asking Bayano a question usually begins with a big smile, followed by a long monologue. Bayano likes talking. He’s always talking. I asked him about his name. ‘If it was his real name?’ Bayano used to live in *Bahia*, a region northeast of Brazil, about two thousand kilometers from Rio. At the age of 21, he decided to drive his VW minibus from *Bahia* to Rio de Janeiro in search of a job and a better life. By the time he arrived in the *Big City*, his car broke down. After living for some months on the streets, he moved to the *morro* and people from *Fogueteira* started calling him Bayano, ‘from *Bahia*’. (Repórter sem Fronteiras)

Waiting for Bayano, from: Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos Archive: ‘Waiting for Bayano’, Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos, February 24, 2011. This article is based on an interview with Bayano — living in the Fogueteira favela, Rio de Janeiro, July 2010. Written by Repórter sem Fronteiras.

Barracos — or shanties are the names given to the poorly-constructed dwellings in favelas.
Fogueteira — is the name of a small favela in the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro, close to the popular tourist quarter of Santa Theresa.
Morro — is Brazilian for ‘hill’. Favelas are mostly located on hills and the word ‘morro’ is a nicer word for favela.
Morro de Prazer — is a favela on the opposite hill of the Fogueteira favela. *Morro de Prazer* literally translated means ‘Hill of Pleasure’.
Bahia — is a region in the northeast of Brazil.
Big City — refers to Rio de Janeiro.



The Destroyed Room 2010

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We reached Bayano's house, or 'what used to be his house', after a wild mud safari. It started out with the two of us jumping like kids from one stair to another, along the path that descended down the *Fogueteira morro*. It got more serious as we left the stairs and tried to make our way along the steep hillside. There were no houses here; in fact, I had never imagined there might be places on this hill that were 'empty'. The brown hillside was coated in mud-soaked debris, leftovers from a landslide caused by heavy rains earlier in the year. Nobody had bothered to clean up the mess. I wanted to stop and have a better look, but Bayano kept moving. I had to concentrate on keeping my balance, trying not to lose my flip flops, fall in the mud or slide down the hill. We soon entered a little zone of green, another surprise. It felt refreshing, this 'island of jungle', treasuring the last bits of the extinct *Mata Atlântica*. All of a sudden Bayano ordered me to stop. He tore a piece of cardboard from a nearby pile of trash and laid it down over a puddle — like a real gentleman — so that I wouldn't get my feet wet. I didn't see the point since my feet were already covered in mud. He probably thought I was a spoiled Western city girl, which made me angry, but I didn't feel like getting into a discussion and it wouldn't have mattered anyway.

The house was surrounded by trees and other greenery. I hadn't experienced such silence in a long time. It felt good. The meddling of chirping birds put me in a peaceful mood. No sign we were still on the *morro*, or in Rio. A quiet oasis isolated from the rest of the *morro*, the rest of the city and the rest of the world. A peaceful place to raise children. No one could imagine it as a place of tragedy.

My eyelids were fluttering. I wondered if it was because my eyes were adapting to the darkness in the house, or because they were trying to process the chaos and distraction. It took me a while before I could define what I was actually seeing: a pile of red bricks haphazardly heaped in the middle of the room next to a cream-colored sofa, a kitchen cupboard hanging askew on a wall, an atlas lying open to the page on Europe with a brown spot on the Balkans, a bunch of clothes spread out on the floor — stiff and colorless from being

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soaked in mud, a section of wall that had buckled, pieces of broken CD boxes covered in mud, a red plastic toy car imprisoned under the weight of a pile of red bricks, a wifi stereo lying on its side — barely recognizable in the mud, a broken LP record, a shampoo bottle, a children's book, a kitchen pot, a brick, two tins of canned food, a set of headphones, another brick, a pile of bricks, a plastic bag, a doll, mud, a plastic soft drink bottle, a TV... The landslide had demolished all the inside walls, leaving one large single room. Everything that had once been standing was now on the floor. Although my eyes could see, my brain could not comprehend. My head was full of descriptions, trying to inventory every object in the room and it's dramatic condition. When my brain finally started to work, the first thing it could think of was 'Destroyed Room 1978'. It was amazing, exciting, me being a part of this art work, to be standing in this 3D version of a 2D photograph taken by Jeff Wall. It was beautiful. 'It all happened very fast', I heard Bayano saying '... but at the same time it was happening in slow motion'. I woke up out of my daydream with embarrassment, and saw Bayano's sad face. The manic and uncontrolled violence of the rain, had ordered, like in Delacroix's 'The Death of Sardanapalus', the destruction of everything Bayano had owned. He was left without a house, without a home, without all his possessions. Luckily he and his five children survived. I tried to imagine the sound of destruction.

My eyes were drawn to the beauty of this crime scene, remembering the recent past of a long time ago. Everything has remained untouched. What seemed to have happened only a few days ago actually occurred nearly six months ago. Nobody has ever cared to clean up the mess. (Repórter sem Beiras)

The Destroyed Room 2010, from: *Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos* Archive: 'The Destroyed Room 2010', *Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos*, February 24, 2011. This article is based on an interview with Bayano — living in the Fogueteira favela, Rio de Janeiro, July 2010. Written by Repórter sem Beiras.

Fogueteira — is the name of a small favela in the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro, close to the popular tourist quarter of Santa Theresa. *Morro* — is Brazilian for 'hill'. Favelas are mostly located on hills and the word 'morro' is a nice word for favela. *Mata Atlântica* — or Atlantic Forest is a region of tropical and subtropical moist forest, tropical dry forest, tropical savannas, and mangrove forests which extends along the Atlantic coast of Brazil from Rio Grande do Norte state in the north to Rio Grande do Sul state in the south, and inland as far as Paraguay and the Misiones Province of Argentina.



Arab Stranger
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After struggling through a long painful life, the charger for my laptop finally gave out. The beginning of the end was about two years ago. I was trying to finish a project a couple of hours before catching a flight to Tirana. My concentration dissolved when the smell of burning plastic started to penetrate my nose. As I looked down under the table, I saw my little charger sending emergency signals in the shape of long thin trails of smoke. By the time I came back from Albania, my father, an ingenious handyman, had fixed it. The only problem was that I could never leave its side when plugged into the electricity for fear of my house burning down. Sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night wondering if I had unplugged it in my office. I would lie awake counting sheep for an hour or more until finally — dragging myself half asleep to the car and then driving to Brussels in the middle of the night — I would find the charger unplugged. I'd then drive home, exhausted, but relieved, and climb into my cold bed. Early upon my arrival in Rio, a year or two later, the charger would only work if I held the cord in a certain position. After getting tired of holding it and typing with one hand, I devised a solution using Scotch tape and a clothespin. This solution lasted for two weeks until one day it finally really did die. Since I couldn't live without my computer, and my computer couldn't live without a charger, I went searching. As it turned out, there was only one place in all of Rio de Janeiro where the type of charger I needed for my laptop was sold — *Ipanema*. I decide to celebrate my purchase, the new charger, with a little walk on the beach in Ipanema. It's a sunny winter day; a brisk cold wind is blowing; the beach is rather empty. I take off my flip flops and let the cold sand slide through my toes as I walk in the direction of the *Morro Dois Irmãos*. There in the distance, a man in a white costume is waving at me. Delighted by the spontaneous greeting, I wave back and

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continue walking. A moment later I hear someone shouting and yelling. As I turn around, I see the same man, dressed in a white robe and headscarf, running towards me. I look left and right to make sure it's not me he's targeting, but with no one else around, it's clear it is. He keeps on shouting and running in my direction. His robe, which is way too big for him, is clumsy, and the heavy refrigerated box he is carrying makes it hard for him to run in the sand. He almost falls. Not sure if it's a mirage, my imagination or just some crazy guy, I look around to see if anyone else has noticed. The few people nearby are all staring in amazement. The surreal situation makes me wonder, 'Should I run?', 'Should I be afraid?' The man stops about an arms-length in front of me. He's very close. He's completely out of breath and sweating. He puts his heavy box down and looks me right in the eyes. He smiles, and then frowns. Suddenly, I recognize Bayano's black face in the Arab garb. I shout his name; we embrace, laugh, hug and fall to our knees in the sand. I would certainly have recognized Bayano among a thousand faces on the *Fogueteiro morro*, but I didn't expect to see him here at the beach in Ipanema and certainly not in such an outrageous costume. Nor did I expect to find him selling salty snacks to tourists, for he's the one who always wanted to be a gardener, dreaming of making the green world greener. As we recover our composure, the people on the beach around us stop staring. He offers me a *salgado* and we sit on the beach for a long time, talking. (Repórter sem Fronteiras)

Arab Stranger, from: *Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos Archive: 'Arab Stranger'*, *Jornal de Artigos Não Lidos*, February 24, 2011. This article is based on an interview with Bayano — living in the *Fogueteira* favela, Rio de Janeiro, July 2010. Written by Repórter sem Fronteiras.

Morro — is Brazilian for 'hill'. Favelas are mostly located on hills and the word 'morro' is a nicer word for favela. *Ipanema* — is a known beach district in the South Zone of the city of Rio de Janeiro. *Morro Dois Irmãos* — is a hill situated between the favela of Rocinha and the favela of Vidigal, located in Leblon, in the South Zone of the city of Rio de Janeiro. *Salgado* — is a typical Brazilian salty snack, a fried pastry filled with cheese, shrimp or minced meat.