

“Brainiac”: An Excerpt from *they were many horses* by Luiz Ruffato

Peter Lehman, Introduction
Rebecca Lippman, Translation
University of California, Los Angeles

In his opening speech for the 2013 Frankfurt Book Fair, translated and republished in this issue of *Mester*, contemporary Brazilian author Luiz Ruffato reemphasizes his writing as a form of “commitment.” More of a commitment to an epoch, language, and territory than to an overarching political ideology, Ruffato’s stance has manifested itself in a variety of forms since he left journalism to become a full-time professional writer, the path he took after his acclaimed third publication, *eles eram muitos cavalos* (*they were many horses*, 2001). Composed of sixty-nine numbered micro-stories that occur during the course of one day in the megalopolis of São Paulo, Ruffato’s “anti-novel” *eles eram* won the APCA (Paulista Association of Art Critics) Award for Best Novel of 2001 as well as the Machado de Assis Prize for Narrative from the National Library Foundation, and it established Ruffato as an important voice in contemporary Brazilian literature.

After *eles eram*, Ruffato discontinued his first two collections of short stories set in Cataguases, Minas Gerais, reintegrating them within a larger project called *Inferno provisório* (*Provisional Hell*), a five-volume sequence of novels that aims to construct a history of the Brazilian proletariat during the second half of the twentieth century. Along with his novels, Ruffato’s editorial projects such as *25 mulheres que estão fazendo a nova literatura brasileira*, *Questão de pele: contos sobre o preconceito racial* and *Entre nós: contos sobre a homossexualidade* have brought together a series of underrepresented Brazilian authors in anthologies that focus on questions of class, race, gender, and sexuality. Accordingly, the various reactions to Ruffato’s Frankfurt speech cannot be easily separated either from ongoing debates about literature or from his own positions as a writer within both Brazil and a world literary system.

Although Ruffato's full-length works have been widely translated into other languages (Spanish, French, Italian, German, and Polish), they have yet to appear in English, making Rebecca Lippman's translation of "O 'crânio'" ("Brainiac") a timely contribution and hopefully an augur of more translations to come. A micro-story excerpted from *eles eram muitos cavalos*, "Brainiac" both stands alone as a singular part among the other vignettes and intersects, somewhat unexpectedly, with overarching themes in Ruffato's work. While the many characters in the collection neither know nor connect with each other, the textual narratives return repeatedly to common spaces within the urban environment where the micro-stories take place: cars, buses, taxis, helicopters, public squares, alleyways, bars, apartments, Internet chat rooms, and informal neighborhoods or *favelas*. These spaces present a formally contained glimpse into the lives of Ruffato's semi-anonymous characters, characters whose memories, longings, hopes, and fears establish their precarious relationship not only with others, but also to an amorphous outside world defined in large part by the threat of anonymous violence.

Despite the fact that the narrator of "Brainiac" makes a living selling drugs, the anonymous violence in this case does not emerge explicitly through the figure of the criminal or *marginal*. Instead, violence erupts from the supposedly opposite side of order: the police. The story, however, also signals perhaps at more subtle forms of repression against those like Brainiac, a burgeoning young black writer from the *favela*, who use literature to contest their allotted social place, question unremarked forms of consensus, or make connections across the disjunctive social spaces of the novel. Alongside Ruffato's recent speech, this piece presents literature as something that contains a transformative potential, albeit a potential that is simultaneously distant and incredibly close.

47. "BRAINIAC"

where I come from Brainiac is the weirdest kind of guy
but that's why he's the most loved too
he's sixteen years old almost five foot eight about one hundred seventy
five pounds
so black the black water that runs between the shacks doesn't even
come close
his teeth so white and good like nobody else
and first and foremost he's my brother
even though I'm brown close to mulatto short and missing teeth
and we had another brother more of a nappy blonde
that was even his nickname nappy
but he got popped off in a mission gone wrong still pretty young
our mom shackled up a few times but didn't have any kind of patience
for macho-types sons-of-bitches who wanted to beat up on her
working hard she paid her own way
never really needed a man our mom
all of them got stuck dancing in the hands of the police thugs
you know my brother Brainiac he doesn't smoke or snort
spends all day reading and eating – these are his vices he says
reads anything that shows up and eats just about everything too
he's always around carrying an empty shoebox full
with stain-remover razor dust-brush superglue cardboard
he'll grab a book all beat-up
missing its cover greasy half-dead
transform it into almost new
like an EMT doctor
he's the shit he's crazy smart
I don't just like him because he's my brother
everyone here respects him
all the mothers use him as an example and point him out passing by
when I see Brainiac kinda sad
sunken into his bed with nothing to do
I go out and figure a way to come back with a book
but a fat book a real fat one because he says
that skinny books can't hardly stand up on their own
ghetto books he jokes around don't even deserve to live
Brainiac when he laughs lights up all around

like headlights his teeth so white and good
one time we snatched a postman and took him out to a ravine
slashed the guts of his backpack out onto the floor of an abandoned
house
we started collecting check books and credit cards
and feeling around the airmail stuff too
because there's still idiots who send money in those
and I stopped at some plump brown packages
tied up with flimsy twine
I asked the fool if they were books
he nodded yes with his head
I slipped them under my arm and we all took off
I sent one of my guys to give them to Brainiac peeled bare of wrapping
because my little brother he's that systematic
he'd never open a letter that didn't have his name on it
and when I came back home after three days he gave me a real big
hug and said shit man
and praised the books one at a time saying out their titles
but there was one he liked the best it's awesome he said
he grabbed a thick volume I remember even now spartacus by howard
fast
Brainiac was so intensely happy I was real proud
being the brother of such smart brother
who's got a folder where he takes note of the book and the author
when he received it when he started reading when he finished
writing down each one in that tiny writing of his
when he's reading Brainiac looks like a Buddha
sometimes I holler at him to come have a beer with us
in a nice set-up somewhere near campo belo
he joins us and goes around calling us all suckers
showing your face to get beat up selling cocaine the police sniffing
around the back
before you know it you'll be dancing he says
and that posh guy from his mansion in morumbi
over there just getting more rich kids studying abroad
imported car all decked out with security
butler nanny gardener maid cook housekeeper
men bought in the palm of his hand

and you guys are like flies hanging out on horseshit
waiting your turn to get popped off like ants in a line on the anthill
waiting to get booted out
and then people get kinda pissed off
but nobody complains because deep down they know Brainiac's right
he's always right
and Brainiac got even more pissed off when he found out
we had to kill this one guy who tried to resist
a little trigger-happy got nervous boooooom shot him at the stoplight
because he says these idiotic things that the rich don't live on the
streets anymore
they're way up there in the helicopters
shitting their pants laughing at me and you down here killing each
other
Brainiac's a real rebel
because of him we grabbed all our gear and we were gonna start a
revolution
he thinks we should only rob banks or armored cars
kidnap millionaires occupy un-owned property
Brainiac is a real fucker
when he turned fifteen we put two naked girls in his bed
then we all went out drinking and blew out candles and shit
and when he got back kinda out of it
didn't turn on the lights just got under the covers
he was so freaked out by the naked girls shit man hand picked
by one of our professionals a fat dollar
we paid we even had to save up
but Brainiac got pissed off sent them to put their clothes on and get
out
he called me over and gave me a talking-to
I was pretty messed up and couldn't stop laughing
and he just kept getting more pissed off and went out into the alley
if he'd been anyone else I would have shut him off
shit man we set that thing up with nothing but love
and paid a nice gem for those girls they thought it was weird
but Brainiac was right
he said when I want to screw a woman I don't need you guys

that's how Brainiac is

he's a romantic

told me one time he writes poetry

one day I'll show you he said

I said he could show off his notepad to those beat box guys

I know everyone around here and we show it to them they could put
it to music

he said no no my poetry isn't for singing it's for reading

and he said out some verses from a book I remember richie found on
the street

it was this thing so fucking complicated I didn't understand it for shit

but I said I liked it and he laughed pretending to believe me

like I said Brainiac is a real fucker

the other day he was held up smack in the center of the favela

the cops were doing a round

told him to show his documents

shit man he don't have no work papers no ID no passport

the police made him get down on the ground all a mess

his face stuck into a little river of sewage shit

put handcuffs on his wrists and ankles and

left him like that on the ground humiliated the whole community
disgusted

after that they shoved him into the cop car and took off

for this grand city of são paulo

they beat him up and tortured him

Brainiac didn't do so good after that Brainiac

who gets along with everyone

but that's not a problem we framed this one guy

paid him off to buy all the paperwork about those police thugs

who messed with my brother name address work-shift

and tonight's gonna be a long one you know we're gonna rustle up
some things

right now I'm on my way over to the shack to grab my Glock with
Brainiac

because he stashes our weapons and ammo in a box of books

and like always he's gonna ask what's going on and I'm gonna have
to lie

because Brainiac he won't like what we're about to do

shit man Brainiac worst thing about him Brainiac's got a heartthisbig