

The Other Side

Simone Toji

■ **ABSTRACT:** This is a story about the disturbed perception of an elderly person of Polish origin who is living through the effects of dementia. Throughout his discontinuous flashes of consciousness, the text plays with senses of alterity and the invisibility of different groups who lived or are still living in Bom Retiro, a neighborhood in the city of São Paulo. The story refers symbolically to a sense of “discovery” of new migration patterns in the city when south-south migration flows became prominent. The existence of different groups of nationalities is also represented in the narrative by the characters’ use of terms borrowed from various languages. While Polish is recovered by the main character in order to explore a sense of belonging, words in Italian, Spanish, or Portuguese are appropriated by him and other figures to establish a certain degree of alterity in relation to the migrants who are native speakers of these three languages.

■ **KEYWORDS:** alterity, Bom Retiro, flashes of awareness, invisibility, migration, São Paulo, time

Introduction

Bom Retiro is a district in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, which has received groups of international migrants since the end of the nineteenth century. Until the first half of the twentieth century, the majority came from European countries, such as Italy, Spain, Greece, and the Eastern European nations affected by World War II. In the 1970s, families from South Korea joined the neighborhood, while Paraguayans, Bolivians, and Peruvians arrived from the 1990s onward. One of the mechanisms that interweaves this variety of nationalities is the area’s garment business, which developed upon the arrival of the first migrants. “The Other Side” expresses this context through the flawed memory of an elderly character who was born in Poland, got married to a woman of Italian background and is presently struggling to follow the transformations in the neighborhood.

It has been bothering him since yesterday. That smell . . . the smell that was coming from next door. But what the hell was that damn *carcamano*¹ Luiz doing? Jakob left the elevator and walked slowly toward his own apartment. He entered home warily, and before locking the door, he observed the neighbor’s apartment for a moment. While he was closing the door, he mumbled some swear words as he was taking a tissue out of his pocket. Wiping the sweat off his face, he continued to wonder about that smell as he sat on the worn-out armchair in the living room. Overwhelmed by the smell, he abandoned his arms and legs completely.



The smell that came from the apartment next door . . . oh . . . it didn't ask permission as it inundated his tired nostrils and body. At first, that smell brought the memory of his mother. *Mamusia*.² Then, it sparked reminiscences of the time he didn't know he was Polish. *Polska Ojczyzna*.³ His babyhood was something far away and blurred. It was that time when he was little—so little that he had not felt he was a whole person. That time was his mother's lap and her hands in movement manipulating the needle and the thread . . . but there was also that smell. That smell that was neither sweet nor bitter. It had something of sweat, saliva, and resignation. That smell gave him a sense of home while initiating a monotonous and unsatisfying hum-hum. That was everything that was left from Poland.

Hello? Dad, it's me, Ewa. Yes, Ewa, your daughter. How are you? I've heard you are not doing well. Francisca called me and told me that you complain about everything. Now you don't even let her in. Dad, let her in. She is the person who cooks, cleans the house, and helps you with medication. Can you let her in, please? She also said that you're forgetting everything and that sometimes you don't recognize her. Why don't you come to live with me and John here in New York? I'm worried about you living alone in the old neighborhood. Bom Retiro is not the same anymore. São Paulo has become too violent. Why do you insist on living there? Most of your friends have moved to Higienópolis. Only you remain in Bom Retiro. All right, I know Mom insisted on staying, but now she's not with us anymore. There's no reason for you to stay all by yourself. What? Hello, Dad, hello, are you still there? Hello?

In that apartment, everything had a story. The grubby curtains, the threadbare rug, the scratched dining table, the consumed chairs, and the cracked tiles. Mary Help of the Christians, to whom Gina offered prayers in Italian, lingered on a cupboard in the kitchen. The saint used to keep his deceased wife's company, and he was certain that Saint Mary was still protecting him. The old photos of his daughters yellowed on the corner table, and the ballroom trophies of the Renascença Club grew tarnished. Jakob knew he was growing old together with all those objects, but until that moment all that was inside that apartment had filled his life. He never needed to remember Poland.

Przepraszam, mamo,⁴ sorry.

Jakob gathered all the courage he could find and knocked on the *carcamano's* door. Since he became a widow, he hadn't seen Luiz. Gina was the one who arranged Sunday meals with the neighbor's wife. The meetings were very joyous . . . very joyous indeed. Now, after all the time that had passed, Gina rested in peace and the echo of laughter resonated through his memory. Only closed doors remained there. He rang the doorbell and, while waiting, that smell, that damn smell attacked him. Nobody. He rang it again. Only that smell came to see him.

What the hell were those damn Italians doing behind that door?

Well, sir, it has been a long time. Don't you remember? Mr. Luiz had a heart attack watching a soccer game . . . Madam Gina even helped the family that day. In the end, Mr. Luiz's family sold the apartment. Yes, I'm sure. You know, since I have been the janitor, all kinds of people have lived there, Koreans, *Baianos*⁵ . . . The last time there were some Bolivians making rattling noises day and night, day and night. I believe those poor souls were sewing clothes nonstop. What? Does it smell, Mr. Jakob? What sort of smell? No, the place is empty now. Yes, I'm sure. There's nobody there. Do you want the keys, Mr. Jakob? Okay, take the keys, I will phone the landlord. You never know what kinds of things those *cucarachas*⁶ left there.

They left rags, empty thread reels, crooked needles, parts of old sewing machines all over the floor. The rubbed walls, marked with traces of labor, suggested the place of tables, machines, and workers. The smell permeated the entire room, that smell so intimate and familiar to Jakob.

The daylight entered through the bare windows and Jakob's eyes were able to see everything in the empty apartment, the rags, the cartons, the metal pieces he touched with his own hands while bringing them close to his nose. He started to touch the floor, the walls and to sniff them compulsively. He inhaled the whole place to the extent of intoxicating himself. What was that smell?

On a calendar hanging on one of the walls, he stared at the image of a sprawling city under imperious mountains. Jacob read the caption under the picture and, surprised, his voice sank to a murmur:

O Boże! Mamo⁷ . . . Cochabamba⁸?

■ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This piece was developed during my doctoral studies, which were made possible thanks to funding from the CAPES Foundation, Ministry of Education of Brazil. I am grateful to Jonatan Kurzwelly for his comments and support with Polish. I also thank Michele Wisdhal and Yousif M. Qasmiyeh for their attentive reading and help with the manuscript.

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■ NOTES

1. Italian: derogatory, referring to Italians in Brazil.
2. Polish: Mom.
3. Polish: Poland.
4. Polish: Sorry, Mom.
5. Brazilians born in the state of Bahia.
6. Spanish: Cockroaches. Derogatory, referring to people from Spanish-speaking countries in Brazil.
7. Polish: God! Mom.
8. One of the largest cities in Bolivia.