

The Lithographer

“Not long ago,” said he at length, “and I could have guided you on this route as well as the youngest of my sons; but, about three years past, there happened to me an event such as never happened before to mortal man – or at least such as no man ever survived to tell of – and the six hours of deadly terror which I then endured have broken me up body and soul.”

The lithographer lays the manuscript on the table. While his lean and wrinkled fingers run through the pages, his sight gets lost through the window that trembles with the onslaught of the *minuano*. He shakes with a slight shivering and covers his shoulders with a blanket. Unlike the rest of the Museum of Porto Alegre, the turret is not heated. Nevertheless, he climbs all the way up there, once his work shift is finished, to allow his imagination to run free. The day before, an editor friend asked him to illustrate a new translation of Edgar Allan Poe’s short story *A Descent into the Maelström*. Unlike other extraordinary tales by Poe, such as *The GoldBug*, he holds no memories of this story about seafarers caught by a storm on the Norwegian coast. He raises his head towards the books placed over the shelf: Auguste de Saint-Hilaire’s *Province de S. Pedro de Rio Grande do Sul, au Brésil*; Wolfgang Hoffmann-Harnisch’s *Relato*; and the *Atlas ambiental de Porto Alegre*. The lithographer couldn’t help but think about his father, a gruff gaúcho who used to scrutinize the sky in order to unscramble its presages. He was even the first to foresee the danger, on that given April of 1941, whilst nobody wanted to acknowledge the Guaíba rising as more than a simple and transient flood. His father knew how to read the auguries of the weather, he who crossed the ocean as a young man to escape another thunderstorm that raged in Europe. This was maybe equally due to the fact that this man of the land was less familiar to the river than to the torments of the *minuano* wind, whose coming drama he was able to acknowledge before anyone else.

The edge of the whirl was represented by a broad belt of gleaming spray; but no particle of this slipped into the mouth of the terrific funnel, whose interior, as far as the eye could fathom it, was a smooth, shining, and jet-black wall of water, inclined to the horizon at an angle of some forty-five degrees, speeding dizzily round and round with a swaying and sweltering motion, and sending forth to the winds an appalling voice, half shriek, half roar, such as not even the mighty cataract of Niagara ever lifts up in its agony to Heaven.

The wind keeps bashing the turret’s window. Although the museum was formerly at the waterfront, the floods now seem far removed. The city has, since a long time ago, been developing the several embankments that secluded the Guaíba’s waters at a few kilometers, and has also diverted the course of one of its affluents, the Arroio Dilúvio. Its meandering course is now replaced by a straight line, once drawn with a ruler by some engineers. Nature obviously did not frighten them, so that they could then claim its redesign. The lithographer did not perceive time passing; he only had a few minutes left to catch the bus to Vila Guaíba, where he lived with his wife and daughter. On this bus that takes him to the south of the city, he gets overwhelmed by the weird feeling yielded by the first pages of the story: the feeling of being at a place as awkward as possibly understandable. Taking a closer look, there is only the wind and the bluster that seem familiar to him just like the *minuano* wind, who never seems to hush. But he bears no experience regarding the water, even less when it comes to the sea and the tide, not to mention whirlpools and riptides for him who has never traveled outside of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. He only has this river, the Guaíba, along which he lives but knows so little about.

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It is still quite early, but Dona Renata and her daughter are already bustling about the shop they built right in front of their house. People from the community do not waste any opportunity to have a quick chat and a steaming cup of coffee. Renata was careful enough to keep a little of it for the lithographer, who takes his thermos, the daily newspaper, and the pocket book, puts everything under his arm and descends all the way to the margins of the Guaíba. He takes a lawn chair before deciding to put everything and the thermos at the cement edge of a sink. He puts his hands mechanically underwater. While closing the tap, he watches the water slowly flowing in a spiral and asks himself whether this was what Poe called a whirl. He serves himself a cup of coffee and ends up sitting down. His look is caught by the fishnet of his neighbor, Senhor João, who put it there at dawn before coming back to lift it up a bit before noon. The net floats in between plastic bottles and caps. Does João happen to eat the fish he catches? Probably, otherwise why the hell would he do it? And so being, he manages it very well, despite the arguments of the health authorities.

In all violent eddies at sea there is good fishing, at proper opportunities, if one has only the courage to attempt it; but among the whole of the Lofoden coastmen, we three were the only ones who made a regular business of going out to the islands, as I tell you. The usual grounds are a great way lower down to the southward. (...) In fact, we made it a matter of desperate speculation – the risk of life standing instead of labor, and courage answering for capital.

Raising his head, he notices his wife sitting not far from there and discussing with Celia. It has been a while now since the young lady in charge of the local nursery is interviewing the neighborhood's elders. Celia records her talk with Dona Renata, who laughs while remembering several memories and the beginnings of the community. He prefers to see her happy like that; different from last week when a journalist came to ask the residents some questions about the newly repainted façades, and questioned her on the possibility of an eventual relocation, ever insinuating that this place no longer belonged to them actually. Dona Renata could not hold back her tears, and the lithographer's blood started to boil.

It was on the tenth of July, 18—, a day which the people of this part of the world will never forget – for it was one in which blew the most terrible hurricane that ever came out of the heavens. And yet all the morning, and indeed until late in the afternoon, there was a gentle and steady breeze from the south-west, while the sun shone brightly, so that the oldest seaman among us could not have foreseen what was to follow.

While reading, the lithographer could not help but hear Renata talking:

—But of course, she explains, there was nothing here before we arrived. It wasn't until after the flood of 1941 that the fishermen settled here and started to put together a first allotment. Before being called Vila Guaíba, we called it simply fishermen village. We lived at Pintada Island, which was completely awash. At first it was only a camp site and everyone helped each other, then my father built us a first wood house. After that there were other floods – smaller ones, of course –, but once again we had to leave for an aunt's home upland. But we came back and my father built a second house.

The lithographer always heard bits of these chronicles. However, this time he is taken by a curious feeling, a combination of guilt and admiration, as if, over the years, he had not paid these stories the attention they deserved. He now realizes, all the same, that these narratives are also part of the charm that kept them around the river for almost thirty years now.

Such a hurricane as then blew it is folly to attempt describing. The oldest seaman in Norway never experienced anything like it. We had let our sails go by the run before it cleverly took us; but, at the first puff, both our masts went by the board as if they had been sawed off – the mainmast taking with it my youngest brother, who had lashed himself to it for safety.

—Oh, of course there were some shipwrecks. But the Guaíba is not to blame for, it was due to the *minuano*. See, I can tell you something, my father went fishing and used to settle way down there, right next to Lagoa dos Patos, where he camped for around two weeks. But sometimes the wind rose and he stayed there for days in a row, without provisions. They had no sugar or salt left, and some of the guys who could no longer take it to eat fish without seasoning threw themselves at the open sea, not minding the wind, and ended up capsizing. God forbid me, nothing like this has ever happened to my father.

The lithographer recalls his father-in-law, always with a steaming mate in a calabash gourd, telling fisherman's stories, especially during the Holy Week, when the entire family gathered together, the fishing nets were thrown, and everyone used to eat fish and drink milk.

I was now trying to get the better of the stupor that had come over me, and to collect my senses so as to see what was to be done, when I felt somebody grasp my arm. It was my elder brother, and my heart leaped for joy, for I had made sure that he was overboard – but the next moment all this joy was turned into horror – for he put his mouth close to my ear, and screamed out the word 'Moskoe-ström!'

So that's where the term maelström came from, from a place – of the most terrifying ones – in Norway. It must be cold there, a lot more than here. Because the southwest wind rises during nightfall, the daytime is still fresh at this very beginning of winter. The lithographer stays with his eyes half closed while thinking about the Lofoden islands mentioned by Poe. He soon gets to see a limpid and dark vortex, plunging in the abyss.

—But how could you know that a flood was to come?

—Oh, we usually stuck a little wood rod on the soil and observed every day to what level the water would raise. Together with my brothers and sisters, we'd play all the time by the river, but once we realized the water was rising, we would stay home watching it by the window, completely frightened, anxiously looking

the Guaíba ascending.

Looking about me upon the wide waste of liquid ebony on which we were thus borne, I perceived that our boat was not the only object in the embrace of the whirl. Both above and below us were visible fragments of vessels, large masses of building timber and trunks of trees, with many smaller articles, such as pieces of house furniture, broken boxes, barrels and staves.

The lithographer leans against the back of the chair, again with his eyes half closed. The etching slowly starts to gain shape, the black and white grooves more and more tightened until the hole appears, followed by the scattered objects in the whirlpool. But what must a Norwegian boat or tree look like? He ends up opening his eyes to find the river sloshing at his feet. The boat of Senhor João is hooked up to a fig tree, and the boxes he normally picks up at the market to use as lightwood are lying not far from there. Everything is right in front of him, the objects to be featured on the vortex drawing. The lithographer stretches himself in a clamorous manner. It's eleven o'clock, about time to join his friends for a friendly soccer match.

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The Guaíba Committee sues the city department sewage system, both domestic and industrial. The Committee has filed a federal appeal in order to force the municipal clerk to extend the pipe that casts waste into the Guaíba, so that they not be discharged on the bank but rather in the stream to the Lago dos Patos.

The lithographer closes the newspaper while cursing. It takes quite an effort to clean this darned waste every single morning, and it always comes back, no matter what. They do not even bother to spend some additional thousands of Reais to extend a pipe. Absorbed by his thoughts, the lithographer did not realize that his friend Joel entered the soccer field at the same time he did.

—I swear to you, with all those lightnings that fall over Brazil, not a single one of them has struck a politician, says the lithographer while watching the sky grow dark. And waiting for such thing to happen, the river remains polluted as always.

—You are talking about the lake? The Guaíba is not a river...

The lithographer feels like answering but their team-mate is already kicking the ball on the field, and others soon join him.

At length, after making several guesses of this nature, and being deceived in all—this fact—the fact of my invariable miscalculation, set me upon a train of reflection that made my limbs again tremble, and my heart beat heavily once more.

The rain pulls them back to reality. Everyone is already sheltered at Teresa's bar. If there is a possible comfort for a cancelled soccer match, it has to be the cold beer and the fried food of Dona Teresa.

—Lake, river, whatever...

Joel turns to him with a slight smile, and escaping through his lips, says:

—One has nothing to do with the other! It's like comparing a circle and a cube!

Dona Teresa turns up the volume, and now each and every head is oriented towards the TV. An anchorwoman standing in front of several screens and monitors behind which some workers type frenetically, announces in a serious tone that the rain does not seem to fade according to the experts of MetroClima.

—What the hell are they doing behind these damn screens, it looks like a control center...

—Indeed. It is the city's new command center, where all the secretaries gather in case of crisis.

—Let's be honest, they're exaggerating. We're ready to face catastrophes in Porto Alegre with the dam and barrage system, the Dilúvio channeling, and all the pumping stations spread throughout the city.

—But wait, at Vila Planetarium they had floods not long ago. They just installed a station.... And it still seems that sometimes it doesn't work properly.

—Either way, that's unusual. And also, there is more than the pumping stations alone. Take a look at our soccer field that serves as storage bay—there are bays like this all over the city. Mostly they are empty ponds, connected to the rainwater channeling system.

The lithographer slowly plunges in his thoughts. He knows that his friend Custódio takes care of the maintenance of a pumping station. He also knew about the river and the dams. But all these pieces of information gathered now obtain a new meaning. Another excerpt from Poe's story drifts insistently in his head:

I made, also, three important observations. The first was, that as a general rule, the larger the bodies were, the more rapid their descent; —the second, that, between two masses of equal extent, the one spherical,

and the other of any other shape, the superiority in speed of descent was with the sphere; —the third, that, between two masses of equal size, the one cylindrical, and the other of any other shape, the cylinder was absorbed the more slowly.

The lithographer hesitates to say what he has in mind. He isn't familiar enough yet with these new thoughts. He merely says in a laconic tone:

—Well, what you say is nothing but stories of battles and wars of man versus nature. What we've done so far was to gain ground against the river, which, in its turn, is only taking revenge. Nothing has changed since the Portuguese and the Castilians quarreled about this piece of land we call Rio Grande do Sul.

It takes a couple of hours still before a lull allows him to get back home. He finishes reading the story and unsuccessfully tries to find sleep.

I no longer hesitated what to do. I resolved to lash myself securely to the water cask upon which I now held, to cut it loose from the counter, and to throw myself with it into the water.

The lithographer tries to imagine the mariner's braveness to face this ever-threatening abyss. Would that have been the same feeling experienced by his father, an assortment of hope and terror, when he left his homeland? And what would he do in case of a coming catastrophe; how would he himself protect his beloved ones? Floods are not the only possibilities ... In 2004, a hurricane passed not far from there, and nobody saw it coming. What about the deregulated climate; he thought as well. You cannot steer global climate like a boat!

He closes his eyes once again; the drawing regains its contours. He stands up slowly, takes a piece of paper and allows his Rotring pen to flow freely over it. Within minutes, the hatchings assume the form of a terrified man holding onto a barrel.