

CIRILO LEMOS



**RUN,
JOÃO,
RUN**



made by
human

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made by
human

To the Casinha, with love.

*“Everybody's out on the run tonight
But there's no place left to hide.”*

Bruce Springsteen, *Born to Run*

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Run, João, run

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João stands in the shower, naked, startled by the cold water running over his brown skin, clutching in his left hand a worn-out bar of soap. His wife bursts through the door, a scandalous delight, her hair spitting strands upwards as if they were lightning bolts, round hips, ample thighs, perfect in their imperfections. He knows she had been spying through the cracks of the broken door, but he doesn't mind, he even enjoys it.

He turns to her so she can see his sex, lost in a thicket of pubic hair that she insists on trimming with scissors, something João doesn't allow because he's afraid she might end up cutting his balls. She loves it when he says that, laughs a fresh laugh, showing perfect teeth and a wet tongue. She does it

because she knows João can't resist and ends up slipping his tongue into her mouth, pressing her against the wall and sliding his hand over her well-formed buttocks.

But now is not the time for fooling around; a pile of laundry awaits in the backyard, she has to wash it before his wrist starts hurting again. João is hard, doesn't want to stay that way, but she slips through his fingers and runs off into the room, where she sees the baby.

“Run, João, run, the baby's not feeling well.”

João runs, his body still wet from the interrupted shower, and finds the baby trembling all over, blinking as if his eyes were dry and moving his mouth like a fish trying to breathe out of water.

The woman screams and screams, João blows away his desire for her hips, he has to save the baby, help God, what do I do, what do I do?

"Bring a wet cloth, João, bring a wet cloth quickly."

João looks around frantically, damn, he's blind to the cloth, where's a cloth? He spots a yellow dress on top of a wall, the woman's dress. Will she mind if he wets clean clothes? Fuck it, he thinks, and he shoves the yellow dress under the faucet, taking it with him to the room, leaving a trail of water from the kitchen to the living room.

The woman takes the soaked cloth and presses it against the baby's forehead. "It's to bring down the fever, it's too high," she shouts, and she doesn't stop shouting, not at all. Her

screams blend with the music blaring from the bar's jukebox, the screeching of tires burning rubber in front of the house, the imaginary barks of the puppies that died sick the day before. "Go call someone to help this boy, João, run, João, run."

João wants to run, but he can't just go out naked in the neighborhood; he has to put something on. But his legs won't cooperate at all. He tries to go one way, they go the other. He turns one way, they go the other.

Run, João, run.

The baby is no longer having spasms, now looking at the world as if awakening from a deep and sour sleep, everything around him seeming enveloped in a layer of white smoke.

João doesn't know whether to help the woman or to run down the street, but why run down the street anyway? All the neighbors think his family is a bunch of troublemakers, and just thinking about it pisses him off. Screw everyone, he doesn't need them.

A group of people chatting on the sidewalk hears the woman's screams and barges into the house, old folks, men, children. João barely has time to slip on a pair of shorts; the people already form a wall of flesh and opinions that prevents him from approaching the woman and the child.

His voice gets lost in the midst of the commotion until he gives up and goes to cry in the bathroom, looking at the reflection of sunken eyes, remembering the puppies that died the day before.

From there, you could still hear the voices. An old lady wanted to know the boy's name to say a prayer, but prayers won't help, ma'am. You have to take him to the hospital. Put him under cold water because it's a fever convulsion, but we don't put anyone under water.

The woman escapes from the crowd and seeks refuge in the bathroom, where she comes face to face with João crying. He tries to disguise it, rubs his eyes, pretends he's combing his hair to go to the hospital, and she pretends to believe him.

"I want to change clothes, but these people don't get it," she says. João leaves the bathroom, stops at the door of the room. Someone tells him, "Hurry, João, put on a shirt, the car is already coming to take you there."

He just shakes his head, confused. Car? What car? He doesn't know how to drive.

"Hurry, João, hurry!" shouts the woman as she exits the bathroom, already dressed.

João opens the closet door, grabs the first shirt he sees, slips on his flip-flops, and runs his hands through his hair. He puts some extra cash in his wallet just in case.

The crowd starts pouring out, resembling a wave from the sea. At the crest of it all, the baby rides along, unaware of what's happening, much like his dad. João and the woman are engulfed by the wave and swept outside, shoved into a car, and before they realize it, they're on their way to the hospital, the baby sleeping in their arms, the

crowd left behind on the sidewalk waving as the vehicle moves away. João's father is the one driving the car, half bald, half gray, with a stubble, grumbling the whole way about people not respecting personal space.

"If it were out of goodwill, fine, but it's just curiosity about other people's misfortune. I lose it over this," father mutters.

The journey to the hospital is long, filled with shortcuts, curves, and potholed asphalt. The car ascends viaducts over federal highways, from up there, the other cars form a line of fireflies. They navigate through confusing streets between the railway line and the shops.

João squirms in the passenger seat, feeling they're going too fast, but he's

afraid to speak up lest his father scold him. His hand fumbles, searching for the seatbelt, but he gives up. Buckling up would be like admitting they were going too fast, and he might just get scolded anyway.

Another viaduct fades away, taking the county with it.

The streets now are even narrower, with thin sidewalks and crowded buildings that give the sensation of navigating through alleys between houses and shops, not real streets.

The father slows down, then nods towards two guys chatting in front of a gate:

"Ask them if this is the entrance to the hospital."

João's thoughts are sluggish; he shrugs, adjusts himself in the seat, and opens his mouth, carefully calculating the words he'll use.

The father huffs, leans his head out the window, and asks himself. "Is this the entrance to the hospital?"

"Yeah," the guys respond, and the car moves on again.

"You've got to be quicker on the uptake, João" the father advises, while in the back seat, the woman mutters something.

The car enters a winding curve squeezed between brick walls; a bunch of people chat in the middle of the street, children scoot around on scooters, and a car comes from the opposite direction, blocking the way.

"Damn, those potheads gave us the wrong directions," the father says, hammering on the horn in response to the impatient flashes of headlights from the other car.

"Potheads?" João asks.

"You're telling me you didn't smell it?"

João felt nothing but a tingling in his leg and a throb in his testicles, but he doesn't say anything. It's better to stay quiet and try to shake the memories of the woman's hips snaking through his mind.

"One of us is going to have to give in," the father says, revving the car in neutral just for the noise. The other car backs up; it's closer to the end of the alley, but to the father, this is a great victory of

perseverance, or stubbornness, as João's mother would say.

Up ahead, at the end of a small ramp, is the hospital, vomit-colored, with an army of cars occupying every sidewalk, parking attendants circulating among them, laughing, and demanding some change.

The father parks the car at the ambulance entrance.

"Go ahead and start filling out his paperwork while I go hunt for a parking spot. I'm not giving a cent to any of those bastards."

At the reception, the bald man asks for the patient's address, and João starts to answer when the woman interrupts him and gives a different address. The

bald man looks at the two suspiciously and asks them to wait for their turn.

"You've got to be smarter, João. If they find out we're from another county, they won't want to attend to the baby," says the woman, her purple dress slowly inching up and revealing part of her thigh. João doesn't want to think about sex, but he can't help it; he wants to focus on the baby, but it's as if desire is a beetle buried deep in the back of his brain.

João and the woman settle onto a wooden bench, alongside other equally worried parents cradling their children. There are children and illnesses of all kinds: black, white, mixed race, diarrhea, fevers, tonsillitis.

João can't stand the wait; beside him, the baby slowly transitions from pink to

red, tiny drops of sweat sprouting like miniature diamonds from the feverish forehead.

The woman presses her plump, succulent lower lip, breathing as if restraining a painful and untimely sob. That mouth resembles ripe fruit, João remarks to himself, and curses his luck, which manages to turn everything awry even when it goes right, there he was, right in front of the goal, all he had to do was kick it, but suddenly the ball vanished, and in its place appeared his son having some weird seizures, and instead of sex in the late afternoon, he got a tremendous headache deep into the night.

A broad-faced nurse, with a handful of papers, appears at a double-leaf door and calls out the baby's name. João's

wife immediately gets up and disappears through the door with their son, while João, fumbling with her purse, finds himself unable to follow due to the broad-faced nurse blocking his path and then pointing to the sign prohibiting visitors.

João retreats; he could insist, argue, or even bribe, but he simply withdraws. The fan hums on the wall, and outside, in the city squeezed into itself, the night has already descended, and the moon scowls behind the clouds. He should be worried about the boy, but the image of that luminous hip always haunts his libido. He's not to blame; that's just how men are. If the dick stiffens and softens without satisfaction, it's as if he's in a state of chronic hardness.

His wife appears at the door and asks:

"I need some water, João, quickly, before the doctor calls."

João starts searching for someone selling water outside the hospital. He finds a man with a cooler full of cans and bottles hanging, pays the man, grabs the water, and rushes up the ramp. However, the broad-faced nurse doesn't let him in.

João pleads, his tone filled with supplication. Looking down at him like a three-story giant, she allows his entry with a slight smile of disdain that only certain public officials possess, but not before warning:

"You can't take long, make it quick."

João wanders aimlessly down the corridor dotted with doors, the water bottle in one hand, the purse in the

other. He feels like he's in one of those first-person shooter video games, opening doors, closing them, backtracking, opening another door, closing it again. There are so many sick people around, like a horde of zombies, with tired and hopeless eyes.

Where is his wife and son, João?

He's already considering giving up and returning to the waiting room. João is one of those who easily give up on some things, but others remain firmly planted in his will. Just ask the young blonde mother nearby, with her golden-bellied out, holding hands with a little girl in a blue dress. Looking at her navel is like looking at a distant star, and João dives into the sight with an involuntary shiver in his pelvis.

"Thank God," he thinks, as the dark-haired head of his wife emerges from a door and rescues him from the trance he was beginning to sink into. João hands her the water and asks for news about the baby.

"His fever reached 101 degrees," she responds nervously, "that's why he had that seizure. I have a bad feeling, João. What if he dies?"

João shudders.

The possibility of the baby dying hadn't crossed his mind; he thought it was just a regular cold. Children are fragile beings. Now, a black euphoria bubbles inside him, formed by fear, urgency, and guilt.

"The baby won't die," is all he manages to say before the broad-faced

nurse kicks him back to the waiting room.

But now João can't wait anymore.

Through the door, he spots his father sitting on a bench near the dead plants, drinking a can of beer. João approaches without saying a word, and his father invites him to sit.

"Sorry about that, son."

"For what, Dad?"

"For not being able to do much more for you guys."

"It's not your responsibility."

"I know. But I wanted to say it."

"Okay."

His father takes a long sip of the beer.

"You have to be smarter, João."

"I know."

And then an almost comfortable silence settles in.

João doesn't want to startle the old man with his wife's premonition; his father would surely scold him, something he doesn't need right now.

In that moment, João notices a murmur at first distant, but growing increasingly unbearable. Hundreds of voices weaving a monotonous chant of inconsolable cries, somber prayers, and sharp laments. João, frightened, nudges his father, who seems oblivious to the procession marching up the street.

Pale figures form the procession. They carry black candles above their heads, men, women, and children, with icy eyes lost in themselves. As they pass

through the street, all conversation in the houses and on the sidewalks dies down, one of those situations where someone always says, "a soul passed by here", but it's not just one soul; there are many, dressed in a bluish black like a strange dream, chanting dark songs that only João hears, only João sees.

Then all the singing ceases, and the procession halts its march as it passes by the hospital door. An old woman in tattered robes and withered limbs emerges from the crowd and ascends the ramp slowly, moving like a lizard. As she passes João, she stares at him with large, lifeless eyes, causing him to tremble with fear; she knows that he can see her.

The father grumbles about the sudden bitterness of the beer; the people around now talk about melancholies

from which they can no longer escape. No one seems to notice the old woman or the procession, only João.

Just you, João.

When those fixed pupils look at him, João is certain of what is before him.

"You can see us," the old woman says. Her voice is like a wind that comes through the deep darkness. Her scent is that of earth dampened by rain.

João doesn't say anything, he just nods. The old woman smiles and enters through the hospital door; João follows her.

She walks through the corridors with the confidence of someone who knows the way; she enters a room, approaches João's wife, seated in a chair, and gently

removes the spirit of the baby from her arms.

João screams.

The doctor, the nurse, and the mothers are startled, and all they see is a madman punching the air. But it's the old woman he's punching, and the wretched one laughs as her teeth fly out of her mouth. She falls to the ground, laughing and unraveling until she becomes nothing but a pile of rags. As for the baby, he's in his mother's arms, but his spirit is now playing on the floor.

João takes him in his arms and runs, intending to flee with the baby's soul as far away as possible, so that the procession won't take him from there.

Confused, his wife gets up from the chair and follows him. At the entrance

door, she sees him running down the street as if fleeing from a ghost.

"Run, João, run!" she shouts, without knowing why. Only the sleepy baby in her arms can see the crowd creeping behind his dad.

And now, João?

Escaping is more than just panting down the street, it's about getting away, protecting yourself, evading capture. Can you do that, João? Do something other than run?

João doesn't want to look back, to face what's chasing him. Some small, dusty corner of his brain is telling him that if he doesn't see it, it doesn't exist. He wants to believe that, to let a thread of hope gather strength and turn into fortitude.

Is that so, João? You don't want to see them, but you can hear them, can't you? There's no fortress that can withstand the murmurs, the ghostly moans, the strange hiss the air makes as it brushes past your face. The sensation of cold fire that the small spirit in your arms emanates.

He finds himself in a strange, labyrinthine, suffocating city, like a nightmare. Where to go?, João despairs. The long hill comes to an end, a twisted intersection is before him now. The pedestrian signal is red, but damn it, he needs to cross, he needs to escape, there's no time for red lights. But there are so many cars.

You can't just stand here waiting, João. People are looking at you, a madman holding an invisible baby.

João's urge is to tell everyone passing by with suspicious looks to go to hell, he wants to see how these people with their jobs and salaries would react if they didn't have their jobs and salaries and needed to run aimlessly with the soul of their only child.

The baby moves in his arms. He's trembling, poor thing. A slight spasm, almost imperceptible, gentle as the plucking of a harp. João is both amazed and apprehensive as tiny bubbles detach from the boy's back and burst on the roofs of the flattened buildings.

And suddenly that sensation of weight descends upon his shoulders, kilograms, tons, the pressure on his heart that makes him want to cry for the pains of the world, of the animals, the elderly, the children. João squeezes the

baby's spirit against his chest. He knows the reason for the velvet curtain that suddenly makes his thoughts grim: they are here.

João can now see them standing on the power lines, motionless like a flock of pigeons, their dark rags swaying in the warm night breeze. Where is the fortress now, João?

He doesn't want to look up, but he can't stop the movement of his head. The crowd seems to toy with him, advancing when he advances, stopping when he stops. João knows they are waiting for the right moment to descend like a swarm of vultures.

He can see them slightly bend their knees, as if preparing for a long leap.

Run, João, run.

João dashes across the intersection, his eyes almost closed. He feels the gusts of air displaced by the cars, the horns becoming deafening, the drivers' curses tearing at his eardrums.

A bus appears ahead. A miracle, João thinks. He signals to the driver.

The crowd plunges in his direction.

The bus stops, the door opens, João and the baby are inside, and the door closes just as the first figures touch the sidewalk. João stares at them through the window as the bus slowly pulls away.

He pays the fare, passes through the turnstile, and goes to sit at the back. From there, he watches the procession disappear into the distance, the faces resembling masks.

Do you think you're safe, João? For how long?

He doesn't want to dwell on it. He wants to seize the moment to breathe, to compose himself, to take care of the baby in his arms. So what if no one sees him? So what if it's a spirit far from its body? It's still his child, his obligation is to stay with him. And if those things come to take him, if escape isn't possible, he'll go along.

The bus jolts through the potholes and bumps of the rough asphalt. For the first time, the baby's spirit looks at João. It has the lightness of a handful of autumn petals, a consistency of liquid light that confuses the touch, making him feel cold and hot – or a third sensation, he's not sure – where his skin touches that of his child. More bubbles

are detaching from the boy, and the idea that this might be some kind of signal to the figures sends shivers down his spine. João can't deny the fear he has of the child, of its silhouette blurred by a supernatural glow, of its sorrowful pupils that know deep mysteries.

It's the soul of your child, João. Don't be afraid.

It's hard not to be afraid, he thinks. Everyone is.

He can't tell how long they stay on the bus. He dozed off once or twice, startled awake several times.

The baby is whimpering in his arms. More bubbles pass through the bus's roof. João realizes, terrified, that his child is losing substance, dissolving into bubbles slowly before his eyes. Help,

God, don't let him disappear. What will become of my son's little body without a spirit to inhabit it?

The sensation comes again: pain, despair, sadness, so strong that João's will is to die.

He looks out the window.

Where are they? They're not out there, they're not on the wires.

The baby is whimpering in his arms. More bubbles pass through the bus's roof. João realizes, terrified, that his child is losing substance, dissolving into bubbles slowly before his eyes. Help, God, don't let him disappear. What will become of my son's little body without a spirit to inhabit it? The sensation comes again: pain, despair, sadness, so strong that João's will is to die. He looks out the

window. Where are they? They're not out there, they're not on the wires.

Inside the bus, then.

Yes, inside the bus, João, but there aren't many. Actually, it's just one. The old reptilian lady with her gray shawl, her dress whose colors death has sucked dry and are now a faded black. She's smiling at you four seats ahead.

João refuses to look at her. He wishes he could make her not exist, pretend to be rational, but there's that part of him that keeps talking, talking, and talking.

Are those tears welling up in your eyes, João? Crying won't do any good.

But does not crying help?

The old woman approaches. She strokes the child's hair. João shrinks

back on the bench and holds his son tightly against his chest. He's trembling.

"Don't take him away from me," João whimpers. "He's just a boy. He's done nothing. He hasn't lived."

Her white eyes meet his, and João finally understands and despairs: his son is already dead.

Somewhere, his wife is crying over his little body. His father with deep dark circles under his eyes.

Life is just an excuse to die, João. Didn't you know?

"Let me go in his place. Please."

The old woman says nothing in response. She gently takes the increasingly smaller baby from João's arms and cradles him lovingly to her

bosom. She squeezes his cheeks like a loving grandmother. The child laughs and waves his little arms.

The bus stops. The doors open. The old woman descends the steps carrying the baby. João follows her. It can't be this easy.

“I want to stay with my son.”

The old woman says nothing in response.

From alleys, doors, and windows, skeletal figures emerge and join her in her walk, dozens of blurry silhouettes slowly heading towards where the dead go.

“Take me too!” João shouts.

They don't want you, João. Your time hasn't come yet.

"My time hasn't come," he tells himself, and in a surge, he throws himself in front of a cab speeding down the street. The impact happens in slow motion, just as João perceived the passing of his life. The wet snap of femurs breaking. The body growing light, a bundle of cloth cracking the windshield, rolling across the hood, and crashing onto the curb.

Light as a feather, João. Draining away in blood like a feather.

Do you realize the nonsense you've done? They won't take you because it's not your time.

The cab driver is in panic before the body, hands on his head, heart racing.

João is by your side, clothes increasingly faded and smelling of mold.

His skin is cold and white as wax. He doesn't recognize himself in that clumsy corpse.

That's not him. João is now that shape from another world, an abyssal void where there should be a heart pulsating with emotions. Not even the desire for the woman's sinuous body withstands the decline of the flesh. The world is now dim, darkened like a winter dusk, a landscape in a photograph slowly consumed by the yellow flame of a candle.

The procession moves into the distance, murmuring a monotonous chant. The old woman is there with her son, João. If you want to watch over his spirit and be the father you never were, you'd better hurry.

Are you listening?

Run, João, run.

About the author



Cirilo Lemos was born in 1982 in Nova Iguaçu and now lives in São Paulo. A historian, teacher, and editor at Editora Ática, he has been writing for as long as he can remember, though his first short story was published in 2011, in the anthology *Imaginários*, by Editora Draco. Since then, he has accumulated stories and a number of

awards: in 2020, he won the Argos Award for the *Cyberpunk* anthology; in 2023, he received the award for Best Novel with *Estação das Moscas*; and in 2024, he won both the Argos and Odisseia awards for *Um Milhão de Mim*. Between books, revisions, and stubborn ideas, he shares his life with his wife, two children, and two cats who seem to believe they are co-authors of everything.

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Also by the author

The Children I Gave You, Oxalaia

What happens when the end of an interplanetary war reveals that the true battle is for humanity? Amidst cardboard nests and the glow of rockets, the life of an alien washerwoman crosses paths with a young guard in a story about impossible choices. Read for FREE at Clarkesworld.

https://clarkesworldmagazine.com/lemos_09_24/

The Dead Detective'Affair

What happens when Dr. Joseph Bell and his pupil Arthur Conan Doyle travel to Paris for the funeral of the legendary C. Auguste Dupin? In a decaying

mansion surrounded by mist and secrets, the disappearance of a mysterious book reveals that the death of the great French detective may have been only the beginning of a dark conspiracy.

Act of Extermination

In a 1937 Rio de Janeiro transformed by airships, robots, and dieselpunk technology, a hitman haunted by visions of a saint finds himself at the center of a deadly political conspiracy. Amidst the smell of oil and the blood of the Integralist Uprising, he must decide whether he is a pawn of fate or the author of his own redemption.

**Novels (Available only in
Brazilian Portuguese)**

Estação das Moscas

In the Baixada Fluminense of the 90s, where adolescence was measured in VHS tapes and dusty streets, Jona tries to cope with his parents' impending divorce and the feeling that everything is out of place. It is against this backdrop that the Fly-Face decides to appear—viscous, insistent, and attentive to his every vulnerability.

Um Milhão de Mim

Four people in different times and places find themselves entangled by the same enigma: Uqbar, an endless concept that may manifest as a secret society, a metaphysical war, or a tale by Borges. Leading a murder investigation, a detective begins to pull the threads of a web that could reveal the secrets of the universe—or simply invent them. After all, is there a difference between reality

and fiction? And if so, how much does it truly matter?

E de Extermínio

The first Brazilian dieselpunk novel. In an alternative 1940s Brazil, where the Empire teeters between Americans and Soviets, the Trovão family navigates a landscape of wars, conspiracies, and sorcery. Jerônimo, a professional hitman who talks to a saint, tries to retire, but his final job drags his children and stepmother into an endless cycle of violence. Intrigues, shootouts, giant robots, and armed nuns: here, gunpowder and diesel go hand in hand. But can the Trovão family stay together in the face of so much turmoil?

O Alienado

In the steel and glass towers of Center-City, Cosmo Kant—a worker with a philosopher's name—witnesses a man step through a bathroom mirror and realizes his life will never be the same. While the government wages a secret war against Nothingness, he finds himself trapped in fragmented memories, lines that seem like entities, unreachable archives, and conspiracies woven by Outsiders. In the end, only one certainty remains: the Metaphilosophers are watching you.