“Firestarter” from *Gótico nordestino* (2022) by Cristhiano Aguiar

Translated by Ana Guimarães

Translator's Preface

Cristhiano Aguiar is a Brazilian writer and professor of literature, born in Campina Grande, Paraíba. As a writer, Aguiar has published two noteworthy collections of short stories—*Na outra margem, o Leviatã* (On the other shore, Leviathan, 2018) and *Gótico nordestino* (Northeastern gothic, 2022). The latter solidified his literary presence and earned him the Clarice Lispector Award for Best Short Story Collection.

With the publication of *Gótico nordestino*, an anthology of nine short stories, Aguiar challenges the cultural imagination formed by a canon of Brazilian literature from and about the Northeast region. Aguiar's work constructs and deconstructs the Nordeste—not as a region necessarily constrained by cartographic coordinates, but as one within the national and international imagination.[1] In his stories, Aguiar provides fresh interpretations of canonical tropes, such as differences in urban and rural life experiences, migration movements, class conflict, local superstitions and legends, and the description of harsh landscapes, by focusing on the specificity of the geographical region and its people. The stereotypes about the Brazilian Northeast and its people lead it to be seen as a region of revolts, poverty, droughts, backwardness, non-whiteness, and folklore. These stereotypes were created and circulated in Brazilian society as part of nation-building projects of the late 19th and 20th centuries.[2] Since then, the Northeast has been, discursively, figured as a place in a subaltern position in relation to the Rio–São Paulo circuit.[3]

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[1] Here, I follow the lead of scholars such as Barbara Weinstein and Sarah Sarzynski who use "Northeast" to refer to the Brazilian region and "Nordeste" to refer to the culturally constructed plural images of the region.

[2] Drawing on the seminal work of Durval Muniz de Albuquerque Jr., Sarzynski argues that "the trope of *o Nordeste* emerged in the late 19th century as intellectuals defined Northeastern Brazil and its inhabitants, *nordestinos*, as the backward, nonwhite, folkloric, impoverished, and violent Other threatening the modern Brazilian nation." Sarzynski also shows how elites and non-elites contributed to the emergence of these tropes and symbols. Sarah Sarzynski, *Revolution in the Terra do Sol: The Cold War in Brazil* (Stanford University Press, 2018), 17; see also Durval Muniz de Albuquerque Jr., *A invenção do nordeste e outras artes* (Cortez Editora, 1999).

[3] For example, in *The Color of Modernity*, Barbara Weinstein explores how disparities in re-

To a certain extent, Aguiar both nurtures and subverts these images in his collection. He nurtures them by grounding his stories in familiar tropes and settings, aiming to reflect the everyday realities and traditional narratives of the Brazilian Northeast, providing a sense of authenticity and cultural depth. At the same time, he subverts these images and their status as authentic by incorporating references and elements from Greek and Catholic deities, fantasy novels, fables, fairy tales, and dystopian and post-apocalyptic scenarios. This blend of traditional and unconventional elements creates rich, multi-layered narratives that engage both local readers and those unfamiliar with the region. In *Gótico nordestino*, creatures such as jaguars, insects, vampires, the dead, and unknown and inhuman beings populate the stories, conjuring and assembling a beyond-human-centered narrativization.

In "Firestarter," the story selected for translation and publication in this issue, Aguiar sets the scene in a Northeast scarred by fires in the sugarcane mills, dirt roads, and plantations in the surrounding areas of Itabaiana. The imagery of fires, individuals in exile, and the struggles of resident rural workers is symbolic in the national imaginary and widely disseminated in 20th-century regionalist literature, such as José Lins do Rêgo's *Fogo morto* (Dead fire, 1943). This imagery also appears in national film productions such as Lima Barreto's *O cangaceiro* (The cangaceiro, 1953) and in many forró songs that depict the semi-arid region, as famously represented by Luiz Gonzaga. These elements feature prominently in Aguiar's work. "Firestarter," however, presents a landscape of environmental catastrophe with an unusual twist.

In "Firestarter," these images intertwine with references to pop culture, stressing the story's intertextuality with modern technology and apps culture of real-time sharing and instant updates. Set in a futuristic backdrop where adrenaline fuels the narrative, "Firestarter" introduces the reader to the tale of fire collectors or fire hunters. This fire-hunting activity blurs the lines between entertainment

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gional development have led to the formation of racialized identities. Barbara Weinstein, *The Color of Modernity: São Paulo and the Making of Race and Nation in Brazil* (Duke University Press, 2015), 15.

and religious-like performance, creating a culture where groups of people move like a procession venerating fire. As a reference to the phenomenon of Pokémon Go, which encourages people to interact with their surroundings, in "Firestarter" the TPF app—Tá Pegando Fogo (It's on fire, or It's catching fire)—shares information on users' screens, mapping wildfire locations and alerting users of the beloved capturable fires. This gamification of wildfires incentivizes local exploration by fire collectors. Aguiar invites readers to follow the collectors on their hunts. Readers encounter familiar and unfamiliar imagery of the Nordeste while venturing into the collectors' memories and dreams, which are as poetically beautiful as they are deadly.

Aguiar's *Gótico nordestino* is not the first to blend uncanny elements to the Northeastern landscape in Brazilian literature—Maria Firmina dos Reis and Augusto dos Anjos in the 19th century also played with some eerie, degrading, and daunting elements in their respective oeuvres, and the examples of such elements in 20th- and 21st-century literature make for a long list. Additionally, Aguiar's project *Gótico nordestino* aligns him with a new generation of Latin American writers who explore their own cultural imagery, engaging with and reshaping the aesthetic representation of the uncanny. This group includes authors such as Mónica Ojeda, Samanta Schweblin, Mariana Enríquez, Fernanda Trías, María Fernanda Ampuero, and Ana Paula Maia, to name a few. Although these writers come from various countries and focus on their own particular settings rather than the Brazilian Northeast specifically, they contribute to articulating contemporary Latin American literature as a tool for critical speculation. Their works move beyond a mere shared set of textual tools and literary images. These authors explore various manifestations of the uncanny, poetically curating and creating old and new symbols to articulate their worlds beyond anthropogenic metaphors.

This translation aims not only to introduce Aguiar's work to an Anglophone audience but also to highlight the intricate influences that breathe fresh air into contemporary Brazilian literature about the Northeast. As readers engage with Aguiar's work, they, too, become part of the process that redefines the region beyond its geographical confines. Aguiar's work invites us to continually reimagine the Nordeste.

Firestarter

by Cristhiano Aguiar

On the left-hand side of the road, the anticipated and beloved fire.

The smoke, the column of smoke, was an unstable worm.

The screens of our cell phones displayed the TPF app—Tá Pegando Fogo (It's on fire)—the most important thing in global entertainment since the creation of the first Pokémon. If summer brings the fire, it also brings the fever: With the fire season open, thousands of Brazilians throw themselves into the hunt, filming, photographing, sharing on social media all types of fire, embers, blazes, flames, flare-ups, burnings.

On the shoulder, there was a fire brigade truck. Our convoy parked nearby. We turned off the car headlights, finished putting on the protective gear, and started the procession. It was past 10 p.m. and that stretch of road, in the vicinity of Itabaiana, was unlit. The night was sprinkled with stars, but the stain of smoke, playing the role of a reverse Milky Way, ripped it from top to bottom.

The established authorities still didn't understand our hobby. They hindered us with nonsense about safety, standards, and the like. They warned that fire cannot be domesticated; fire has neither face nor name, has neither reason nor party; it is at best, a partner in work (or in misery). Of course, risk, *real* risk, exists. There is a risk when stepping into an elevator, when eating an apple (Eve and Snow White!), in the air we breathe.

Our group made a 12-minute walk through the open field to the fire. It was not possible to see the firefighters, although blotches—a contrast between gray and brown blotches, movements—gradually came into our field of vision. Out there in the field, only sparse grass. And nothing more. Or almost nothing—outlines of trees, hints of bushes, I think one or two sad, semi-dormant houses, reminding me of my grandmothers' homes.

What kind of flames were we going to find, we asked ourselves in whispers.

The game works like any collection. Like a set of collectible cards, your father's stamp collection, or a superhero action figure protected by a dome and displayed at Comic Cons.

There are the common flames in the deck, unsophisticated, frizzy, swaying to the sound of the wind without any precision. It's a run-of-the-mill fire. A clock-punching fire, without joy, without class, without creativity. Fire without flame. A fire is always a fire, so even one of this type is worth it, but we're on the road to capture the jokers—the extremely rare, chromed dragon. The Poop Fire, for example, is a good catch, it curls up into a spiral and forms a little tip at the top; the Clown Fire, more rare, because it has almost a smile in the middle, a sense of humor, a psychopathic look that turns towards us (which is quite chilling, just imagine if fire built a civilization, or could have a good, hearty laugh, a burp made of glowing coal chunks?); the Terminator Fire, because it follows a fast, unstoppable march, the flaming muscles of an Arnold Schwarzenegger firing spark-bullets left and right; the Harry Potter Fire, because it lets off magical puffs through the wind, explosions born from Latin dictionary entries; the Merlin Fire, whose beauties only a more trained eye captures, not the eye of these neophytes. . . ah, the Merlin Fire. . . turning blue as it strolls driven by a destructive pacifism. The beauty to behold in the Merlin Fire is its short, precise flames. They carbonize birds, flowers, plants, plastic bottles, dolls, fingers, leaving behind graphite crumbs. And what about the Phoenix Fire? Extremely rare, rare; the Aphrodite Fire is more of a mirror than prey—it's the greatest of fires because you cannot hang anything on it, no words, it just crushes us. Actually, it's scary.

With each new fire we come across, I am moved to reminisce about the first one. It's a childhood memory, *of course*. As poignant as finding the first dead bird in the backyard, or when the pet cat, Miau-Miau, leaves some torn-apart creature on the entryway mat. It was some books, turned into a bonfire in the vacant lot on the street where I spent my childhood in Recife. I have no idea why they were burning, but I learned what a book is. It's something quite heavy, crude, made of vertical and horizontal axes. A book is a dinosaur that the meteor forgot to exterminate. We open a book and find a mystery inside, the waterfall of line-sentences. But then comes the disappointment. "Is that all?" we ask the book, because around it, promises seem to form, but then, when we open it. . . a burning book is a shell closing in. And in closing so much, the shell cancels itself

out, leaving a pearl of ashes, which, thank God, is swept away by the wind. Everything becomes spirit. It spreads through the air—cough, cough.

The firefighters formed a semicircle around the flames. They used dirt, shovels, and fans as weapons against the fire. We couldn't see any hoses or water.

Nowadays, with the trend of chasing fires, firefighters, albeit reluctantly, are trained to deal with collectors like us. A female firefighter soon noticed us and broke away from her group. She ran towards us, yelling and waving her arms above her head. Neither I nor anyone from our small and select group understood what she was saying. The firefighter gestured; we gestured back, waving our cell phones; her arms over there, our arms over here. We informed her how far we had traveled and that we were prepared. We were wearing proper masks and visors; our internet was 7G.

The flames covered a decently sized circular area. However, the light was no longer scalding. Lukewarm, it remained submissive to the ground. Our group eventually came to an understanding with the firefighter. After reaching an agreement, she led us closer to the flames, and we joined her colleagues who had crossed their arms and seemed relaxed or bored.

I asked the firefighters if they would continue to act.

"I think it's all good, man," one said.

"Better not bother anymore," another commented.

"Let it be," they concluded.

Someone laughed. Crackles and sparks of fire hitched a ride on the heavy wind. The firefighters cast a last glance in the direction of the fire, then turned their backs, headed towards the shoulder of the road, and left.

Contrary to the firefighters, we swore allegiance to the fire. We sat on the ground, ate potato chips, opened beers. We took photos, made videos. We shared. Our cell phones, glowing in the warm night, were also born from the fire, from the fire's cold, hoarse face.

The strength of the flame diminished over time. We ruminated. I was captivated by the thick columns rising to the heavens, columns of sacrifice. . . yes, it's true that there is pleasure in smoke. Risk and death. Our hearts in those hours of the hunt are bursting. We started

to sing. I sing the smoke: in 1986, an African village, located near a volcano and a lake, woke up dead. Not just the men, women, and children of the village. Across the ground, throughout the perimeter of the village, a carpet of cows and thousands of flies lay dead. Few survived death. The survivors reported that, hours before the tragedy, the immense lake had exploded. Its furious waters soared into the sky in the shape of a jellyfish; then, tremors were felt—an explosion had occurred in the heart of the lake, something fiery and molten had escaped from beneath the earth, leaked out. Today investigators and scientists know about the volcano's inner fires. Like a serpent, the smoke, invisible, carbonic, slithered along the ground, through cracks, swayed lanterns. And it suffocated.

Notifications popped up on our small screens. The app warned us: There was another fire —a big one!—close by. We packed up our things (leaving the trash behind) and rushed to the vans. We entered the location instructions into the autopilots' panels and set off. Shortly after we left, another group of fire chasers had just arrived. You were late, fools! You've missed the best part of the show.

The road continued for us—beautiful.

Every so often, our headlights caught a glimpse of a family, or pairs or trios of men, walking along the edges of the road, perhaps on their way home. They were made of charcoal, they were made of saltpeter. They wore humble clothes. They carried hoes and objects wrapped in cloth bundles. They are different from us, who have our vitamins, our creams, our apps, our robots, our 7Gs, and our air conditioners. The season, indeed, was hot! The proof? Dozens of incandescent foci in the darkness. All around—what a beauty!—the rolling landscape burned, but from a distance. Straying from the road and invading the brush and other people's properties could earn several points in the app, but our group was more in search of the spectacle than the competition. And, as the app promised, there was a spectacle of easy access just a few kilometers ahead.

So many fires made the air denser, coiling within itself. Insects flew in a panic, splattering on our windshields; animals ran across the road and along the shoulder—the lights of the vans forced their eyes to shine. Some of us took the chance to nap before reaching the main prey. Not me. My body was restless, my legs trembled. I

strained my eyes to the fullest. I contemplated the orange lights in combustion. I cherished each one, trying not to forget any of them. If I fell asleep now, I would undoubtedly dream of fires. It was a beautiful idea, wasn't it? If each of my slumbering companions had fiery dreams, how beautiful would that be. Because there is also the invisible fire. Being invisible is not just the privilege of smoke. Years ago I had a girlfriend in Brasília, and during one of my visits, she took me to an abandoned building, a theater in Asa Norte. The money ran out, or the money slipped into other people's pockets, she'd explained.

No, no. That wasn't it.

Contemplating the skeleton of the theater, what had I seen there? What had I seen, ladies and gentlemen, right there? A sculpture. A sculpture made less by human hands and more by an unwillingness. No chisel was used. Nothing like that. They used flames. Yes. Transparent flames. Turned inside out above our heads, over the roof and good taste—volcanic gas. Flames of lakes opening up like the split heads of jellyfish. . . what style, what style did those flames have?

"We've arrived," someone said.

The abrupt stop woke me up. I had slipped into a dream, unaware of who was still real.

We got out of the vans. The fire in front of us—dragon wings unfurled—illuminated all the land and the entire sky. An old sugar mill, transformed into a roadside hotel and museum, was burning: The manor house, the chapel, the small homes, the corral, the sugarcane crusher, the boiler and furnace houses, the gardens, the scrubland, the fences. . . everything that could exist, everything that could still have life, was burning.

The authorities—police, firefighters—had not yet arrived, but two or three of their drones were already flying over everything. A group of hunters had arrived before us. They were filming, taking pictures, sharing. Other people gathered, perhaps they were workers or residents of the nearby areas: children, women, men, all with smoky faces.

Our group clapped. Meanwhile, in the background, little children cried and the wood crackled.

The groups debated how to classify it. At first, we thought it was a grand Akira fire, but I argued, and everyone followed, the idea that the show was even greater, more precious. The mill had transformed into a very rare Phoenix fire. Its heat twisted the skin of the plants, the walls, our faces. Beyond there, nothing else existed. There were no words, internet, hunger, return.

How, how can we bear so much beauty, we commented.

How to withstand a lake of fire that is a god taking a stroll?

Aroused, shaken, in love, we shook ourselves and danced.

And, on the final night of the world, we began to be returned to the fire.