

Kali Yuga on the Rio Pinheiros: review by Tom Bradley

Contributed by Tom Bradley

Kali Yuga on the Rio Pinheiros:
 Jim Chaffee's Sao Paulo Blues
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The barbarians will be masters of the banks...there will be kings of churlish spirit, violent temper, and ever addicted to falsehood and wickedness. They will inflict death on women, children, and cows; they will seize upon the property of their subjects, and be intent upon the wives of others; they will be of unlimited power, their lives will be short, their desires insatiable... People of various countries intermingling with them, will follow their example; and the barbarians being powerful in the patronage of the princes, while purer tribes are neglected, the people will perish... Piety will decrease until the world will be wholly depraved. Property alone will confer rank; wealth will be the only source of devotion; passion will be the sole bond of union between the sexes; falsehood will be the only means of success in litigations; and women will be objects merely of sensual gratification... a man if rich will be reputed pure; dishonesty will be the universal means of subsistence, weakness the cause of dependence, menace and presumption will be substituted for learning; liberality will be devotion; mutual assent, marriage; fine clothes, dignity. He who is the strongest will reign; the people, unable to bear the heavy burthen will take refuge among the valleys... Thus, in the Kali age will decay constantly proceed, until the human race approaches its annihilation...

--Vishnu Purana

That's the Limping Sage, Parashara, untold millennia ago, describing the End Time of decadence and dissolution which will immediately precede universal annihilation. You'll notice he doesn't have recourse to the special effects and whole-head latex makeup so formulaically mounted by our own northern hemispherical "speculative" apocalypsisists, those generic scribblers, cyber- or post- or steam- or whatever-punks, who preen themselves on their "narrative courage" in rehashing "the future."

Like Parashara's, Jim Chaffee's nightmare is real and present--if you'll consent to adjusting it downward sixty or so latitudinal degrees. Fill all the Vishnu Puranic requirements for the End Times, and you get the Sao Paulo Blues--

...Brazilians queue up before faceless terminals in lieu of the stupefying banks with lines winding into the street and armed guards forcing customers to pass single file through bullet-proof plexiglass double doors. They entered the concrete bunker of a room and joined a line of silent men and women staring at the floor or walls or ceiling, avoiding eye contact, shuffling toward the one-eyed kiosks. The lifeless electronic attendants swallowed and spewed cash under the glare of a uniformed man on a stool in a corner, his thin line of a mouth drawn tight above a resolutely set jaw. He cradled a machine pistol in his lap.

Here's a bureaucracy that makes Kafka's Great Wall of China look like an office party. A traffic ticket you've already paid several times keeps coming back, till you take it to court and are admonished, along with fifty people in the same predicament, not to pay any more. And it still comes back.

This is a city under permanent self-siege, where time means nothing except when you must slow the car down at a red light and reluctantly expose yourself for a few seconds to the near certainty of ambush, kidnap and ransom demands punctuated with body parts.

The wealth gap has become broad as the interstellar void, with resulting anarchy among the proles--who, of course, along with animals, are free. Rich bastards' fortified compounds, islets in a sewer-sea of penniless depravity, are sentried by militarized police "with machine guns like some kind of fucking Gestapo."

It's not just because he has a splendid specimen ready-made to the south that Jim Chaffee declines to project this imminent nightmare upon some not-so-distant-future version of the United States, a la the overworked boilerplate "vision" of the sundry hyphenated pulp lits. If that was his intention, he could have just as easily stayed home and written a book called Saint Paul, Minnesota, Blues. Obama Land certainly meets the Vishnu Puranic requirements. So why does Chaffee go down south? Why doesn't he consider the sociopolitical beam in his own eye?

The whole point is that he doesn't consider the wind-up to cosmic dissolution anything at all as unpleasant as a beam or mote in the eye. He seeks it out like Zeus linking elbows with Dionysus and flying down to Ethiopia for a party. He loves this great steamy perineum of the Americas precisely for its malodorous dystopianism. He's like Savitri Devi's Man in Time, who embraces the terminal age in all its tawdry, tinselly squalor.

Lest you think our author's motivated by sentimental patriotism in shifting his sights Latinoamerica-ward, listen to this discussion of our own people--

"So maybe it is blackmail. The family is filthy rich. Why all the murders?"

"Maybe they figure they can reach the blackmailer through the girls. Maybe they hope by killing them all to get the right one. Trying to stop it any way they can."

"[Americans] could be that brutal?"

"...It seems to be the American way. Their government has no qualms about indiscriminate slaughter."

Here's money and fucking, Home of the Brave-style--

"American men are stupid about women...They have ridiculous romantic notions. Their women run all over them. American women do not care about sex. The only thing they care about is money...It seems that's all any American cares about."

"Power, Bruno...Power buys women in America. It buys anything you want, including justice. With power, you get money. And more."

Jim Chaffee, this world-class United States-loather, just happens to be a part-time Brazil expatriate--and a home-away-from-homesick one at that. "Mutant piece of Europe" though the Republica Federativa may be, our author describes his adopted hell-home with unmistakable love--

The dark two-lane street lined with decrepit old concrete and brick boxes presented a spectacle of depravity, the air saturated with loud music and louder human voices, the night a carnival of desperate people spilling from bars and sex clubs where men played bingo to win tired whores, the open spaces vacant lots where streetwalkers serviced clients. The garish parade of trolling prostitutes, cross dressers, and transvestites assaulted Mike's eyes...

The hero of Sao Paulo Blues actually chooses to come down. "I'm a fucking tourist," he says, and revels in what he considers a liberating sort of milieu: "There's plenty of personal freedom in Brazil, as long as you don't try to make money."

What kind of guy would seek out instead of fleeing from such a place? What category of person? If you want to get all trans-Himalayan and think like the Limping Sage who epigraphed this essay, what caste would karma have caused a lover of Sao Paulo to be born into?

Here's a hint. He describes mayhem intimately as only a connoisseur can. Jim Chaffee is a former Nam medic, and he's the greatest writer of violence since Homer. And, like Homer, he has a soldier's expertise in human anatomy--or at least those bits of it most susceptible to deliberately induced trauma. When a guy gets clobbered with a leather sap in a Jim Chaffee book, he doesn't lie down and lose consciousness for a narratively convenient period of time. He kneels down and pukes. Blood and mucus ooze from exposed sinuses. He "gulps a hearty lung full of air, a reflex of the intact brain stem, a chemical memory prompting his useless remains to take an occasional needless breath."

It's not by mistake that people look at our hero "as if he was from Mars." Watch how handily he forcibly disembarks and disarms a man in two seconds and one brisk sentence--

He caught the passenger halfway out of the car, slamming the door on him, jerking him into the street and kneeling him in the chest and head so fast he had no chance to moan before Mike ripped the gun from his hand and slammed it into his face.

Chaffee's protagonist's curriculum vita may say "detective," but he's a born soldier, just like his creator. And who better to stride joyously through the Age of Destruction than Destruction personified, the fighting man? In this time of brainless volunteers running interference for soulless Blackwater mercenaries, one forgets the reality, the legitimacy, the essential cosmic function of the pure and disinterested martial spirit, the deoxyribonucleic warrior--what the Code of Manu calls Kshatriya.

The present reviewer, in his upcoming volume of literary criticism, Put It Down in a Book, in a chapter entitled "Support the Troops by Giving them Posthumous Boners," has heaped scorn on the insufferably self-deluded American volunteer serviceman, who regurgitates all the usual socially redeeming motives for his limp-dicked horniness for slaughter. He spouts the political lie rather than just diving wordlessly into the blood because it's his nature and slakes his iron-rich appetite.

Nobody is more persuasive than someone who's unabashedly doing his dharma: Dahmer with the head-drilled boy in the

back room, fast-talking the cops; Obama talking equally fast to mask his own Kali-Yugic function as Dubya Redux, mocking every progressive impulse that put him so smugly in front of our faces. Helping bring the roof down on all our heads is the reason some people are born. Dead meat liquefies more efficiently through the maggot's offices.

Pace Nietzsche, Manu's Code is only secondarily "the most nearly perfect legislation yet enacted." It is less a prescriptive social blueprint than one of humanity's most profound works of descriptive socio-psychology. From this perspective, from beyond the Khyber Pass, we begin to see why Sao Paulo Blues strikes so much deeper than just another cataclysmic potboiler. Chaffee has caused us to behold the Age of Kali herself. Like a great Tantric adept's cryptic code scrawled in menstrual blood on strips of banyan bark, this book is laying out a method, in mythopoeic form, by which we might gain such lurid illumination as remains available in our penultimate aeon of rot.

And who's the essential recruit for helpmeet in the Kali Yuga? Why, Kali herself, of course. Jim Chaffee gives us the most vivid, the most eerily, precisely correct version of this goddess in all western fiction.

Robert Graves famously decreed that a poet should be judged by his intimacy with a certain very different goddess. The genuineness of a poet can be gauged by the clarity of his depictions of her. The "poetic conscience" is revealed in the vividness of its presentation of the White Goddess. Graves was astonished, for example, at the "strange exactitude" of Coleridge's detail--

Her lips were red, her looks were free,
 Her locks were yellow as gold,
 Her skin was white as leprosy.
 The Nightmare Life-in-Death was she,
 Who thicks man's blood with cold.

If Graves' yardstick can be inverted, its polarity reversed, we can take the measure of Sao Paulo Blues. And there's no question Chaffee has been dorking not the White Goddess, but her opposite: she whose whiteness is restricted to the scabby skulls strung on her necklace, whose skin is black as clap. In erotically asphyxiatory sixty-nine, Kali has vaporized Jim's blood with estrual heat.

The heroine of this novel embodies the wildness of matter in the final suction of surface tension before total entropy sets in. Every left-path magician, from the Mohenjo-Daro of the Dravidians to the Pasadena of Jack Parsons, aspires to couple with this elemental monstress before it's too late and the shit hits the fan. That Chaffee survived his liaison, and not only retained the ability to hold onto a pen, but to write with it, speaks volumes about his own status as a modern-day Aeneas.

Talk about the evocation of the shadowier side of the Ewig Weibliche. In Sao Paulo Blues our heroine is a buttfuck queen, able to take on five full-sized individuals of African ancestry at once. It is with ease that she establishes herself as our detective's counterpart in preternatural vigor.

And she is just the right amount of ugly. First impression at the bar: "a hint of chimpanzee." Five-o'clock shades of Crowley's Ape of Thoth, of the Hebrews' arch-succubus, the Hairy One. Both are famous manifestations of the Shakti Kali in her bestial mood, and neither is anywhere nearly so picture-perfect as Chaffee's.

She commands sex, off and on like a switch. Our hero's muse fucks precisely like a left-path Tantric initiatrix: on top, using her vagina muscles like the boys on the Pequod used their hands to squeeze another sort of horrendous behemoth sex fluid. And the "viscous drops" she oozes afterwards are precisely the ruby elixir, the spermatophagic blend of yoni and lingam sauce that every dark sorcerer from the subcontinentals to the alchemists has hankered to sup.

But, true to the protean nature of the female principle, she is also a mother, who talks baby talk to her kid on the phone, knocking the protagonist's mind gauzy and numb with utter incongruity. She can also be "luminous, beatific." She contains all the chicks who toiled, troubled, fire-burned and cauldron-bubbled at the foot of Jesus' orgasmic cross. Bundled into one tiny green Brazilian bikini are Mother Mary, Mary Salome, and, in the knotted bowels of Christ, Mary Magdalen.

In repose she is "a liquid person." After she takes a bath, he can only stare at her, "speechless at the transmutation from simple lovely to exotic siren, like arabesque emerging from plainsong." Lilith, too, is a skilled shape-shifter.

When she and he are together, "it's like combat [emphasis mine]. Boredom punctuated with bursts of intense fear." And there's the key.

We have been given the male and female personifications of total physicality, the highest spiritual attainment in this festering moribund Age of Lead. Many penultimately doughty magi have sprung from such a Martian-Venerean conjunction. For one immediate example, the Talmudic Jesus himself was the bastard of a murderous Roman centurion and a lascivious teen-whore named Mary. And in a single simile Jim Chaffee brings the two together in the

hermaphroditic homunculus that is the goal of all such workings. Hear him catch the essence of their avataric manifestation, beyond greed or patriotism:

Like the conscripted conscientious objector who succumbs to rage and rises to valor in the heat of combat, [the whore] might be the ingenue plying her sensual skill with courage from within a pristine self.

Not the sort of hermetic profundity one associates with generic fiction. Retelling the ageless mythos of the erotically commingled soldier and whore within the frame of a detective story is sheer virtuosity. Sao Paulo Blues is a detective novel in the same genre-pulverizing way that Journey to the End of the Night is a physician's day book.

This is the sort of unprecedented feat you would expect from Jim Chaffee, the inventor of mathematical pornography, the only genuinely new literary form to appear in the last seventy years, for all the plague of "genres" that have lately been pulled out of publicists' asses. He promises a trilogy of such in the near future, and the present reviewer is boning up on his algebraic topology in agonized anticipation.