

## About the Book

*Isolarion* takes its title from a type of fifteenth-century map that isolates an area in order to present it in detail – and in that detail finds a greater truth. For James Attlee, that detail is Oxford's Cowley Road, a teeming, multicultural area of commerce, culture and diversity.

The former site of a leper hospital, a workhouse and a medieval well said to have miraculous healing powers, it has little to do with the dreaming spires of the tourist or student Oxford. What it presents instead is a thoroughly modern, impressively cosmopolitan, and utterly organic slice of life that reflects the complex, invigorating nature of the twenty-first century city.

# Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Acknowledgements

Introduction

## **FIRST PARTITION**

Embarkation

Purification

Of Music and Cannibalism

Doing My Part

The Melancholy Pilgrim

Bread and Circuses

Boucherie Chatar

Designated Desire-Lines: Planning a New Road

Further Purification of the Pilgrim

Enrobed

Of Love and Jewels

Behind the Blue Door (Inside the Private Shop)

From the Literal to the Allegorical and Back

Wittgenstein's Lion and a Cappuccino Sea

Virtual Streets and Gateways: The Plans Revisited

Cosmonauts and Coleslaw

St. Edmund's Well and a Faded Warning

## **SECOND PARTITION**

Making Do and Getting By  
Egyptian Vagabonds, Afternoon Men, and the *Malus  
Genius* of Our Nation  
Losing the Key  
Bed-Sits and *Birārdari*  
What They Think You Can Bear: Football, Religion, and  
Nightmares on the Cowley Road  
Between Two Fires: Pulling the Dragon's Teeth  
Melancholy, an American Photographer, and the Irish  
Writer  
Cowley Road Calling  
Just Less Lucky  
Dreadlocks and Rim-Shots: Reggae at the Zodiac  
Of Lepers, Lunatics, and Layabouts  
Dancing Sand and *Zum-Zum* Water  
Junior Jihad  
Of Books and Bitumen  
Carnival  
Returning to the Source

### **THIRD PARTITION**

A Journey in the Hinterland  
Into the Furnace  
Blessings and Tribulation  
A Graveyard Reborn  
Finding a Clue  
Of Bats and Mutton Curry  
Margaret's Story  
A Hidden Pool

The Liquid Kingdom

The Gateways Close

Of Robots, Wild Rhubarb, and the New Oxford Way

Things Fall Apart: An Ending of Sorts

About the Author

Copyright

# Isolarion

A Different Oxford Journey

James Attlee



BLACK SWAN

*For Charlotte*



I myself have been tempted for a long time by the cloud-moving wind, filled with a strong desire to wander.

MATSUO BASHO, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*



'Isolarion' is the term for the 15th-century maps that describe specific areas in detail, but that do not provide a clarifying overview of how these places are related to each other.

FROM THE PUBLICITY FOR THE EXHIBITION ISOLARION BY SOPHIE TOTTIE,  
LUND KUNSTHALLE, SWEDEN, 2005

## *Acknowledgements*



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Some names have been changed to protect the author.



# INTRODUCTION

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## I

A TIME MAY come in your life when you feel the need to make a pilgrimage. A time when the pressure to return your staff pass, kiss your loved ones goodbye, and set out on a journey becomes too insistent to ignore.

The impulse that propels you may be religious or it may be secular. Perhaps the words of a preacher have ignited a fire in your heart; or perhaps the dusty volume you stumbled across on the shelves of a second-hand bookshop has awoken a thirst for distant shores that cannot be shaken. You may be sick at heart or in body, in need of counsel or immersion in healing waters. The passage of a birthday may have triggered the desire to seek out the birthplace of your ancestors or revisit a scene from your childhood.

The motivations of the pilgrim are as varied as their destinations. You may be headed for a holy city, a site of revelation or miracles, where a god has appeared or a prophet has spoken. You may wish to visit the place where a composer brooded, a poet walked, or the graveyard where a singing voice lies buried. There may be a rite you must perform or a memory you need to lay to rest.

*Jerusalem, Mecca, Rome, Graceland, Thebes, Varanasi, Bethlehem, Tepeyac, Père-Lachaise.*

And so you consult an astrologer or a travel agent, close up your house, give instructions to your servants, smear your forehead with ashes, slit the throat of a quiescent herbivore, smash a coconut on the sidewalk, take up the flagellant's whip, board a train, a tourist coach, an aeroplane, or a leaking tramp-steamer, or simply put on or take off your shoes and walk, run, shuffle, dance, or crawl on your knees up holy mountains, rocky paths, marble steps, and glaciers, braving war zones, border guards, con men, rapacious hoteliers, foreign food, and (most of all) your fellow travellers.

Perhaps you wish to know your God better. Perhaps it is yourself you wish to get to know. Whatever your intention, one thing is certain: that the end of the journey will not be as you imagined.

*Medina, Lumbini, Gangotri, Bodhgaya, Santiago de Compostela, Shikoku, Valldemossa.*

Certain, too, is that your singing, stamping, shouting, chanting, weeping, whirling, and prostrating; your basilicas, temples, grand hotels, and coach-parks; your tented cities and smoky campfires on the banks of great rivers all look much the same from space. Which is not to denigrate any of the traditions that set these journeys in motion and give them structure, for they are clearly one of the things that mark us as human.

For we do not all migrate as the eel or the caribou, the swallow, the tern, or the salmon. Equally driven, our goals are less explicable, our needs more arcane. The journeys we undertake do not necessarily involve travelling large distances. Many of us are not free to set aside our responsibilities for an extended period; there are mouths to feed, bills to pay, deadlines to meet that keep us entangled in the present, anchored to our locations, and yet jerked

here and there by the breeze from another place, like thistle-down caught in a web.

This was my situation. Yet gradually it dawned on me that the voyage I needed to make began in my own neighbourhood, within a few minutes' walk of my front door. It had been there all the time, under my nose, even as I made other abortive attempts to discover a starting point. This would be an urban, post-modern, fragmentary pilgrimage that could be dipped in and out of, freeze-framed, and re-run, visited between other commitments – and yet nonetheless a voyage of discovery for all that.

There is an old road in my neighbourhood that follows approximately the path that ran between the city walls of Oxford and the medieval leper hospital at Bartlemas, and beyond it to the village of Cowley. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, farmers still grazed their flocks and made hay in the unenclosed meadows and marshland that lay outside the city wall. Cowley Road is now the main thoroughfare through East Oxford, connecting the academic and touristic heart of the city with the Cowley Works, the car factory that in its heyday in the 1960s employed over twenty thousand people and has been a magnet for immigrant workers since the 1920s. Its name is derived from the Anglo-Saxon, a combination of the word *lea*, a glade or clearing in the forest, and the name *Cofa* – Cofa's Glade. Today it is lined with businesses that seem to represent every nation on earth. Among them are Jamaican, Bangladeshi, Indian, Polish, Kurdish, Chinese, French, Italian, Thai, Japanese, and African restaurants; sari shops, cafés, fast-food outlets, electronics stores, a florist, a Ghanaian fishmonger, pubs, bars, three live-music venues, tattoo parlours, betting shops, a Russian supermarket, a community centre, a publisher, the headquarters of an international NGO, musical instrument vendors, butchers (halal and otherwise), three cycle shops, two video-rental stores, post offices, two mosques, three churches, a Chinese

supermarket, a pawn shop, a police station, two record shops, two centres of alternative medicine, a late-night Tesco, an independent cinema, call centres, three sex shops, numerous grocers, letting agencies, a bingo hall, and a lap-dancing establishment that plies its trade on Sundays.

Why make a journey to the other side of the world when the world has come to you?

## II

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Have they not travelled within the land so that they should have hearts with which to understand, or ears with which to hear?

QUR'AN 22.46

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I live in a famous city, a city that has been sold to you in a thousand ways. A myriad of writers have set their dramas upon its ancient streets, discoursed upon its architecture, and provided guides to its quads and colleges. Few even mention the Cowley Road, let alone the people who live and work there. Many of its inhabitants have made their own journeys from far away, under all kinds of circumstances. They have brought with them not only their cuisine, but also their beliefs, their values, their trades, their prejudices, the stories of their past, and their hopes for the future. This is the other Oxford, the one never written about. This city has dispatched anthropologists, explorers, scientists, authors, and poets to every nation represented on Cowley Road. Perhaps it is time to flip the coin and see ourselves through their eyes.

In 1994 the artist Francis Alys walked through the streets of Havana wearing a pair of specially constructed magnetic shoes. Three years previously he had taken a magnetised

metal 'dog,' that he christened *The Collector*, for a walk through the streets of Mexico City. At the end of these 'strolls,' both the shoes and *The Collector* were covered in the metal detritus of the city. Somehow this accretion was redolent of the overheard conversations, snatches of music, smells, and other sensory impressions that one gathers on an urban walk.

I have no magnetic shoes. Instead I carry a notebook, a pen, and an old-fashioned cassette recorder loaded with magnetised tape, with which I intend to capture the sounds of the voices I encounter. One way in which to classify people is by which sense they primarily relate to the world. We can all think of friends who *consume* life; who, when they are not cooking or eating, are constantly picking at, shopping for, or reading about food. Others are dominated by the visual, sensitive to the coded messages of colour and design embedded in their habitat by nature and human ingenuity. Then there are the tactile ones, constantly reaching out to touch and stroke, sensitive to the fabric and texture of life. For yet another category, it is the sound of things that matters. As a child I progressed through the world testing the resonance of surfaces made of wood, plastic, metal, stone. I was constantly being told to stop tapping my feet, drumming my fingers, beating out a rhythm on whatever came to hand. Even today, in the middle of laying a table, I can become distracted by the ability of the 'give' in the blade of a knife to approximate the spring of a snare drum. Now it is my wife and children who beg me to desist, and I am genuinely surprised: *Can't they hear how great that sounds?* Given this predilection, it is only natural that I am interested in capturing the aural landscape of the road as well as its visual qualities and wafting odours. My analogue tape recorder will replace Alys's magnetic shoes. At those times when a recording device is inappropriate - in casual conversation, interacting with friends and neighbours - I will have to press a button in

my head marked *Record*. Then, when I summon up the characters that I have met upon my journey in the eye of my imagination, I will run the conversation again and try to convey their words as exactly as I can.

It was Heraclitus, of course, who came up with the formulation that we are never able to step into the same river twice. If the Cowley Road is a river, the big fish lie hidden beneath the surface in the shadow of its banks: landlords, entrepreneurs, developers, local politicians, wheeler-dealers, import-export men.

The obverse of Heraclitus's maxim may be that one is never able to step out of the river the same, twice. A neuron in the brain is altered with every experience. The self, if it exists, must be a constantly evolving thing. Those coming to the banks of the Ganges or the Jordan to immerse themselves do not expect to leave the same as they arrive. Perhaps this will apply to me, also.

Because we are at war, I learn that Muslims are buried on their right shoulder, facing Mecca. I am astounded that I never knew this simple yet fundamental detail. People are living and dying all around me, the formative rituals of their lives as hidden as the rites of a people half a world away. Perhaps this is always so. In any case, it cannot hurt to attempt to lift a corner of the curtain.

I wind up my radio before hanging it on the corner of a radiator and stepping into the shower. In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Haruki Murakami uses the song of the wind-up bird as a motif for the engine that keeps life going. For me it is the sound that the handle of my wind-up radio makes that starts the day. Two academics are having a discussion about transport problems as I apply the soap. 'A hyper-mobile society is an anonymous society,' one says. For seven years I have been getting up at an unholy hour to travel by train back to London, where I have lived for most of my adult life, to work. In many ways I still feel more rooted there than in Oxford. I was used to inhabiting a city abundant in space

and spectacle, large enough to lose myself in. A hyper-mobile man, I have to learn to travel more thoughtfully, to slip beneath the surface and explore more deeply. Space is relative. One aim of my pilgrimage will be to connect me to the neighbourhood in which I live. At the same time, perhaps my journey will offer clues to a wider reality. Oxford is an untypical city, its centre preserved in aspic for the tourists, its biggest landlord an ancient institution that still owns an inordinate amount of its buildings. Much of the change and diversity in the city has therefore been concentrated into a small area, its visible expression squeezed like toothpaste from a tube along the length of Cowley Road. Paradoxically it is this place, often overlooked or omitted from the guidebooks, that is a barometer of the health of the nation. It is both unique and nothing special. It could be any number of streets in your town. For that reason alone, it seems as good a place as any from which to start a journey.

# FIRST PARTITION



# EMBARKATION

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We should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return - prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as relics to our desolate kingdoms.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU, 'Walking,'  
from *Excursions* (1862)

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OUR STARTING POINT is a red-brick pub built at the end of the nineteenth century. A road sign affixed to its wall points the direction of our journey: B480 Cowley. It projects like the prow of a ship, dividing the traffic into two streams flowing up Iffley and Cowley roads, so that sitting in the front of the bar, one can see out onto both streets simultaneously, as well as onto the Plain. The result of road improvements carried out in the 1770s, its position earned it the name 'The Cape of Good Hope.' This name has not survived into the new century; instead it has been rechristened 'The Pub, Oxford.'<sup>[fn1](#)</sup> The pub sign is a reproduction of the painting *The Scream* by Edvard Munch, after the version he painted in oils on cardboard rather than the later graphic versions he produced as woodcuts. The sunset is there in lurid orange and the screaming female figure, with, in this version, strangely protuberant eyes. Two figures flutter in the background, black as crows. Along the pub frontage is emblazoned the slogan '*It's a Scream.*' This pun on the Munch work provides the rationale for the décor, the key to the whole *concept*, I realise. Inside, the words are repeated in yellow on the black polo shirts of the staff. The Victorian interior has been transformed. Ceiling and window-frames are painted green, the walls a mustard yellow, and the

radiators vermilion. A blue leather sofa sits on a raised dais surrounded by green iron railings. Beside it cluster cubes of red and blue vinyl seating, their primary colours reminiscent of the furnishings in a kindergarten.

Munch worked and reworked *The Scream*, as was his practice. His main sources of inspiration were his own journals, albums, and previous works. 'I have always worked best with my paintings around me,' he said. 'When they were placed together a sound went through them right away and they became quite different than when they were separate. They became a symphony.' All his works were part of a series, 'a poem on life, love and death.' He first expressed the intense anxiety he felt one evening at sunset in words, only later portraying the emotion visually in *Despair* and *The Scream*. Writing was as important to him as the visual arts. The first commandment of the Kristiania bohemian group that he belonged to, which was led by the anarchist novelist Hans Jaeger, was 'Thou Shalt Write Thine Own Life.'

This he did. Sitting in a library, I jot down Munch's differing accounts of the intense experience that inspired the numerous versions he created of the famous image:

*I walked along the road with two friends  
Then the sun went down*

*The sky suddenly became blood and I felt the  
Great scream in nature . . .*

*I walked along the road with two friends  
Then the sun went down*

*And I felt as if a breath of sadness  
(A sucking pain beneath the heart)*

*I stopped - leaned against the railing*

*Tired to death*

*Over the blue-black fjord and city  
Lay blood and tongues of fire*

*Over the blue-black fjord and city lay  
Clouds of dripping steaming blood*

*My friends walked on and I was left in  
Fear with an open wound in my breast*

*My friends walked on and I was left  
Trembling with fear  
And I felt a big, unending scream go through nature*

Inside the Pub, a giant screen shows MTV videos, dancing figures rendered spectral by the late-afternoon sunlight spilling in the open door – as spectral as the voices of the long-dead African-American singers sampled by the dance DJs whose rhythms animate the shaking, snaking bodies. Oil drums, sawn in half lengthways, containing one clear and one yellow bulb, hang from the ceiling. This is not an environment designed to be seen when sober or empty of the crowds that will flow in as the evening progresses. To arrive early like this is an embarrassment, like being the first one at a party. Only a lost tourist or a dedicated alcoholic would choose to drink here in the afternoon. Slot machines pulse with multicoloured lights. A young man with a bunch of keys hanging from his belt roams the room, rearranging the position of plastic menus that advertise *'The Scream Burger – It's the Double-Decker Daddy of the burger world!'* And coffee: *'We don't do Decaff – No Caffeine, No Point.'* He tells me the Pub is part of a 92-strong chain, mostly in university towns. Did he know what the inspiration was behind the use of Munch's image? *'Oh, The Scream?'* I couldn't tell you. To be honest, I think we might have to stop

using it; I don't think we have permission. Or perhaps we did have and we don't any more. Anyway, I'm not climbing up a ladder to take it down!'

The figure from Munch's picture has been rendered as an inflatable, on T-shirts, calendars, posters, postcards, and mugs. These are versions that the Norwegian artist could not have predicted. I am not sure why the image has exerted such a lasting fascination that it has been possible to sell and resell it in this manner, particularly to the young. Does the feeling of existential angst that Munch portrays strike a chord? Or have people taken it to mean something quite different; an expression of frustration, perhaps, or the combination of fear and exhilaration that is the drug of choice of the young male? Has nature's howl of pain become the whoop of the teenager on the roller coaster or the rictus of fear on the face of the young man charging downhill in a shopping trolley for the tv cameras?

The Pub lies at another border; the ancient one between town and gown. Clearly designed to appeal to students, it attracts another clientele as well, young men preparing for a night out in the city. Until fairly recently, foreign students were advised not to cross Magdalen Bridge; the sons of ambassadors and the daughters of American presidents are more often to be seen in the West End of London than on the Cowley Road. Of course, many of the students and those that teach them now make their homes in what residents sometimes call the Independent Republic of East Oxford. Both the ancient, original Oxford University and the newcomer Oxford Brookes University are building more and more student accommodation in an area already under pressure in terms of affordable housing. Yet a trip to the Cowley Road for many students is still an encounter with 'the other.' Sometimes that encounter is harsh and unexpected. Three students lived next door to us for a year or so; quiet, unassuming boys studying something to do

with science or mathematics. They went for a drink at the pub at the beginning of Cowley Road one night (it was then under different management). As they left, they were assaulted - punched in the face and relieved of their watches and wallets. When they returned from the Accident and Emergency Department of the hospital with their cuts and bruises tended to, they found that their shared house had been burgled and that their laptops, inscribed with the precious research for their PhDs, had all vanished. In the way that one does, all three had failed to back up their work. On the other side of a one-brick thick Victorian wall, we had not heard a sound.

The starting points of journeys are often brash, unattractive places. Ferry terminals, stations, airports, the transit ships in *Star Wars*. Loads are shunted, lorries backed up, tanks filled, decks sluiced down, straps tightened, windscreens washed, luggage X-rayed, stowaways and contraband smuggled on board. These are not places to seek out haute cuisine; the Scream Burger is the national dish of the itinerant. Munch's painting could be incorporated into the flag of those who find themselves stateless, unable to go back but unable to progress either, caught in a web of bureaucracy without rights or a discernible future. 'The past life of émigrés is, as we know, annulled,' writes Theodor Adorno. Walter Benjamin was such a one, caught on the border of Vichy France and Spain, clutching the briefcase that contained a manuscript, the survival of which he repeatedly told his travelling companions was more important than his own. Overcome by thirst on the journey through the mountains, he knelt to lap water from a puddle like a dog. What is the worst that can happen, he asked his guide, who remonstrated with him; in a couple of days I may be dead of typhus, but I will have crossed the border and my manuscript will be safe. He wanted it to reach Adorno in New York. At the border the Spanish refused to let the travellers through, and Benjamin, fully aware that he was

too weak to go any further, took cyanide in his hotel room. What of the manuscript? It disappeared without a trace, sucked into the vortex of *The Scream*, the drag of its undertow etched in the swirling lines of sea and sky.

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[fn1](#) Correct at the time of writing; the original name has subsequently been revived.

# PURIFICATION

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WHEN DEVOUT HINDUS travel to make puja at a temple, their heads are shaved. Our Tamil friends from London, Sri Lankan refugees from the civil war who first arrived in Britain hidden under blankets in the back of a lorry, have won their British citizenship after waiting over a decade. They now feel secure enough in their status to take their children to visit the temples of South India for the first time. Their sons, dressed in sportswear and keen Tottenham Hotspur supporters, grumble good-naturedly at the extreme coiffure they will have to undergo.

Almost opposite the Pub, at number 7, is a barber, a somewhat glamorous establishment with a varnished wooden floor, across which hair drifts like the iron filings in an Etch A Sketch. Black-and-white photographs by Herb Ritts and Ruth Orkin and reproductions of Klimt paintings decorate the walls. The rhythm of the techno that bubbles from the speakers is overlaid with swathes of sound that seem to be synchronised with the movement of the electric clippers across the head of a customer having a number-two cut. To entrust your head to the scissors of an unknown barber is a frightening thing, but I enter the brightly lit interior in the humble spirit of one embarking on a pilgrimage. I am not seeking a ritual haircut; I am looking for the same one I have always looked for, a haircut that improves your appearance without making you look as though you just had a haircut. This is the hardest one to find.

When I worked as a musician in London, I had an acquaintance, a second-generation Clerkenwell Italian also

in the business. Through him I found myself a regular at a barber's on Wardour Street, run by an Italian named Gino. Gino's was down some steps in a tiny basement; he was the only barber on the premises, a small, dark-skinned man with gold chains around his neck, what appeared to be a gold watch around his wrist, and the beginnings of a pot-belly beneath his white T-shirt. He travelled into the West End every day from a southern suburb of the city; returning home in the evening, he would call his house from the phone-box outside the station, letting it ring two or three times and then replacing the receiver. This was the signal for his wife to put the water on to boil for his pasta, he told me, so that it would be ready when he walked through the door.

The man cutting my hair today seems to have a lot on his mind; we do not speak. This is fine with me. I am assessing him in the mirror, deciding whether we are to embark on the relationship of trust that should exist between a man and his barber. At Gino's, conversation was obligatory. It was an intensely male environment, where the normal hierarchies were laid aside and policemen and Soho criminals alike could find temporary sanctuary from the street. Many were the confessions that Gino received, in the quiet afternoons. There was something about him that inspired men to unburden themselves; and, I was to discover, if you played him right, he could be persuaded to pass on what he had heard, like a corrupt priest who had lost respect for his vows. This was how I learnt that my acquaintance was allegedly involved in some serious financial misdealing. To be more precise, Gino suggested he was printing money (the speciality *de la maison* being obscure currencies) in the little print-works in which he had an interest and had bought his house (where I had eaten Sunday lunch beneath a portrait of the pope, along with his silent, ancient mother) with wads of the stuff. The best thing about it was that his wife suspected nothing! In Gino's eyes, this was



quintessentially Italian. If you had no secrets from your wife, what kind of life was it?

Sometimes barbers give you too much information. Aged twenty-two, I was foolish enough to find associating with petty criminals in some way glamorous. This was the result of personal immaturity and a rural childhood, and later led to a lot of pointless trouble. Today's barber plays his cards close to his chest, and I like him the better for it. However, he does not deliver the haircut I am looking for and penalises me for requiring the use of scissors - they do not fit the soundtrack apparently. I leave more of my hair and more of my money than I had bargained for behind me - a common state for a pilgrim - and head off up the Cowley Road.

# OF MUSIC AND CANNIBALISM

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Migrations. The flight from tedious states. Against urban scleroses.  
Against conservatives and speculative boredom.

OSWALD DE ANDRADE, 'Cannibal  
Manifesto' (1928)

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AT NUMBER 33 lies Galeria Brasil, a tiny commercial gallery dedicated to the folk art and crafts of Brazil. At the front it displays a selection of ceramics, jewellery, sculpture, and clothes, including a wide selection of Havaianas, Brazilian flip-flops that are all the rage this summer. I am more interested in what one can find towards the back of the shop. Here they offer a selection of the popular prints created to illustrate the poems of the street poets of the Brazilian North-East. For many years these troubadours have declaimed their poetry on the streets, hanging their pamphlets, or *folhetos*, for display on a *cordel* (string). For many of the rural poor, the *folhetos* were the only kind of literature they came into contact with, brought back from the local market town to the village, passed around and read out loud by the literate to gatherings of appreciative listeners. In the heyday of *folheto* production, local presses turned out thousands every week. The pamphlets are illustrated by dramatic woodcuts, in some cases executed by the poets themselves (as in the case of one of the best known living *cordelistas*, Jota Borges), in others by artists commissioned by the presses that produce the pamphlets. As the journeying of the *cordelistas* has been restricted by the changes overtaking modern Brazil and the *folhetos* have had to compete with other forms of entertainment, their

illustrators have started to produce their work in larger formats, to take advantage of interest from galleries and collectors who have become aware of the vibrancy of the popular culture of the North-East. The woodcuts, known as *xilogravuras*, have some of the immediacy and angularity of German expressionist prints, but their subject matter is purely Brazilian - an apocalyptic cocktail of myth, politics, and religion. Saints battle the devil; a young couple rides through the air on a peacock; people are turned into animals as payment for their sins; the rural poor rise up, demanding their rights.

I visit on a Saturday afternoon; the shop is constantly busy with customers, particularly young women attracted by the jewellery in the window. Brazilian friends of the gallery owner, Celine, drop by to show her their photographs and share news from home. In between these comings and goings, I ask her how she came to open Galeria Brasil on Cowley Road. Her voice on my tape is backed by the Brazilian music that is a continuous accompaniment to the activity in the gallery.

'Since I was a child, I have adored north-eastern ceramics. I used to play with little figures when I was a child, and I have always loved them. When I came to England for the second time, I decided to set up a shop where I could trade on a fair basis with the producers and the artists in Brazil. I had worked for Oxfam in Brazil, mainly with battered women, helping them to empower themselves in the Trade Union movement - it was really in the backlands of the North-East. I am not connected to any fair-trade organization, but I interact with the artists and I pay the price they ask, and if I think that it is too cheap, I tell them, "Look, you are charging too little." I bring things over on a very small scale. I love doing it. I cannot survive just on the big pieces and the sculpture and so on, so I decided that I needed to have the bread and butter, and also I wanted to promote these small clothes designers from the North-East

of Brazil; I bring these very crazy things for the young people and also the fashion jewellery that is doing very well. That is what I sell most. What I like best are the prints and the sculptures, but everything I sell reflects Brazilian culture – like some of the clothes, the old style of how grandmothers make bedspreads is in that top there . . .’ She points towards a blouse hanging on a rail and then breaks off as she notices some customers hovering near the window. ‘Do you want help with the flip-flops? What size are you?’

When she returns after a successful sale and sits down at her desk, I ask her to tell me a little about the art of the *cordelistas*.

‘Listening to the *cordelista* is very *roots* for me; I grew up going to the market with my mother and hearing them, so it is something very familiar, the naivety and the simplicity of the rhymes is very beautiful; I don’t know how to describe it . . . Nowadays you don’t get it in most of the big cities any more, although in Rio there is a huge north-eastern community. Because of the drought in the North-East, people migrate south to the city to search for a better life, and there they try to recreate the culture they have abandoned . . . They have a north-eastern market in Rio where you can still hear these people singing . . .’

Cowley Road is another place in which people ply trades learnt in distant lands. Almost anyone can find something here to remind themselves of home; at the same time, there is always something to transport you to a different world.

‘Cowley Road is a very special street,’ Celine continues. ‘All the restaurants and the little greengrocers’ shops and the little boutiques. Have you noticed how many businesses at this end of Cowley Road are owned by women? There is my Galeria Brasil and Bridget Wheatley, the jeweller. There is Bead Games, Eau-de-Vie, the health centre, that is owned by two women. Uniikki, the boutique, is owned by Raija; I think she is Finnish. And there is a woman who owns an

Indian restaurant, the Mirch Masala . . . Many people from South America and the Caribbean go to the Pakistani grocers because you find similar types of vegetables to the ones we get at home. Mangoes, papayas, and coriander. Those beautiful mangoes that they only sell by the box come in June when it is the mango harvest in Pakistan; June, July, half of August . . . I love the Moroccan shop. Do you eat meat? Have you eaten the *merguez* sausage they make? It is Moroccan lamb sausage; they have a spicy one and a non-spicy one, and it is cheap and delicious. I usually grill them. You ought to try . . .'

Celine, who lives locally, has made something of a study of her neighbourhood. 'Although East Oxford is very multicultural, it has a very English character of its own; very tolerant, easygoing . . . There are a lot of professional liberals, doctors, and people working for NGOs in London . . . The other side [of town] is more snobbish, more boring. I lived in Summertown, and on Saturdays sometimes you didn't see a single black person on the street . . . But I am always arguing with the council, because sometimes my street is so dirty. I ring the council, and they say it is too many people from outside and they throw rubbish, and I say I don't care . . . if that is the case, you have to have a strategy to keep it clean. If you go to North Oxford, it is spotless. I think if you drop a matchbox on the floor there, the guys will come to pick it up . . .'

This belief that they are discriminated against in terms of services – regarded as less important than inhabitants of the more affluent parts of the city – is characteristic of residents of East Oxford. I emerged from my house one day to find the Victorian kerbstones that edged the pavement being removed by council workers. Weathered and uneven, these were the only original pieces of street furniture remaining in the vicinity. As they were levered out of position, they were replaced with uniform concrete slabs. I have a particular connection with these kerbstones. On millennium eve, to

celebrate the turning of the century, we had a huge party in our street, starting at five in the afternoon and carrying on until three in the morning. While countless thousands of others travelled to exotic locations or crowded to the centre of cities, we had decided that we would bring the millennium home and party where we lived. After games for the children in the afternoon and a communal meal, accompanied by music from a barrel organ played by an elderly resident, the bacchanal began. Aided by copious amounts of alcohol, a couple of hundred people danced in a tent erected in the middle of the street to music spun by local DJs. As each DJ arrived, often from previous engagements in the city, they had to push their way through the crowd to the decks, cheered and backslapped like boxers climbing into the ring. Champagne, beer, vodka, tequila, and lethal Cuban rum flowed in an apocalyptic mix.

The music tent got more and more crowded as the evening progressed. At a certain point, stepping backwards to give space to another dancer, I tripped on an up-ended bench stored at the edge of the dance floor, fell backwards, and hit my head on one of those Victorian kerbstones. For a few moments I lost consciousness, vanishing as completely as though I had fallen down a hole in history, a gap between the centuries. Seconds later I had got to my feet and returned to the mêlée on the dance floor as though nothing had happened (although onlookers told me later that I appeared to be dancing in slow motion). Looking around at my family, friends, and neighbours, I remember feeling an almost transcendent happiness that did not all originate in a bottle; the sensation felt by the traveller, returning home after a long journey. The next day, gently touching the lump on the back of my head, I realised that my life could have ended at that moment; people die in such absurd and unexpected ways. If it wasn't for the people that I would have left behind, I cannot think of a better way to go. A month or so after the kerbstones were removed, along with