



Between the Faith and the Fever

Text by Jon Baker.

What is the purpose of religion? Why do people so blindly place their trust in it, or so fanatically defend its honour?

We cannot deny our own mortality; the evidence is all around us. But the burden for some is easier to live with, in the knowledge that after death under the watch of god our lives will continue. Those who live in ancient societies where grief and sorrow are ever present put their belief in gods as a way to escape a torturous existence. If life is unbearable now at least salvation can be found in the comfort of death. Each year in Northeast Brazil an ominous holy parade, winds its way among the impoverished tracks of small towns and settlements. This waling display is host to the penitents, or as locals have named in conspiratorial whispers "the soul feeders". These men and women operate in the face of condemnation from Catholicism and the local churches. They cover their faces and bodies in tunics, dragging the burdens of heavy crucifixes and march endlessly, praying and chanting, with some taking their task to an extreme and whipping and beating their flesh.

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The drive for these disconcerting displays is for the freedom of the souls who have been lost in purgatory, in the hope that God will take notice and liberate these souls to heaven. These desperate acts are played for the benefit of those who have lost ones they loved and reassure them that their final resting place will be a peaceful one. 'Between The Faith And The Fever', is the name given to a photographic project of these religious outsiders taken by Guy Veloso. This disturbing spectacle would be an easy one for a photographer to take advantage of.

The opportunity for the creation of epic images must be a tempting one. But Guy's photos are tranquil, the chaos momentarily ceased, distilled to a premonition before the life is poured back into the whirling maelstrom. In one photo a young girl turns to face a still figure reminiscent of a Giacometti's sculpture. The girl's head is turned gazing at the apparition, her face obscured by the tumbling of her hair. The penitent is covered from the head down in black robes, to its side falls the ropes used for the thrashings. The only thing shielding the girl from this terrifying spectacle is an unassuming crucifix placed on a wall. Will the girl understand the sacrifices made for her? Guy's touch is a gentle one. He is from the Brazilian town in the North called Belém. A local man, does he understand the local's grief? See eye to eye with their hope?

In another image two young girls, their faces sculpted by the many races that complete Brazil's history, stand in the black robes of the penitents. The girl on the left calmly stares into space contemplating the parade ahead, the other is distracted, a rosary tightly clutched in her hands. I don't think many of us could take the pictures Guy takes. I am sure we could all visit and take some dramatically intrusive picture. But he sees beyond the spectacle and through the intimidating cries to see the parades as an appeasement to God, an act to show allegiance. It's something that those of us who live in our decadent western world cannot comprehend. And underneath the mask of our gory voyeurism, something we are ultimately afraid of.

