*Before I begin, I’d like to note that when I write from Narrm or Birraranga, I do so as an uninvited guest, a settler. My Indigeneity and Blackness don’t change the fact that I’m a beneficiary of Indigenous dispossession in these unceded lands. So, I’d like to pay my respects to the elders of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation, and to any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander folks encountering my work.*

*I’d also like to acknowledge os Povos Indígenas da Amazônia, the Tupi-Guarani, who were the first to tell the legend of Iuara. Keep in mind that the way the tale was first told has no doubt been butchered by colonisers and their gendered tongue, much like the people to whom the story belongs, and land it’s set on. As you read or listen to this piece, think of the Amazon—of its ongoing destruction led and carried out by white invaders for over 500 years.*

Slender creatures sway above me slowly, like seaweed. A glossy, blue-green light emanates from their bodies.

I watch their dance with the same wonder of a child looking through a kaleidoscope, but I don’t have to hold them up against the light for their magic to be revealed. It’s dark out, but they are so brilliant, I can see them with my eyes closed.

I draw circles on my damp, soft tummy, leaving glittering traces where my fingers have been.

Is a wet thing wet if it only knows water?

I’m unsure if the creatures pulled me out of the river or joined me in it.

In perfect sync, they place stars on my naked body. This is an offering.

I am Iuara, mãe d'água.

\*

Actually, you know what? Let me do you a favour and save you from the once-I-ate-some-drugs-and-tripped-balls narrative.

Last time I went back to Brasil, my friends and I dropped some acid, there was a pool, I decided I just *had* to get naked and get in, hallucinated I was a mermaid, and so on, and so forth—we’ve all been there, you get the gist of it.

People call acid ‘doce’ over there, which translates to ‘sweet’. And was it a sweet trip? Yes! *So sweet* that before I got on a plane back here, I got a massive tattoo of Iuara to remember *both* trips by, if ya know what I mean.

But does the world *really* need another Bukowski / Hunter S. Thompson / Jack Kerouac wanna-be? Don’t think so.

\*

Iuara was one of those people who are just, like, annoyingly good at everything. Without even trying. Bitch could fight, sing *and* was a total babe, with her brown skin and eyes, straight, jet-black hair and an absolute rocking bod. Well, apart from the whole being-a-fish-from-the-waist-down thing, I guess, but that wasn’t always the case.

*Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* is pretty great, but—unpopular opinion—Ferris Bueller himself is a little shit. The kid is everyone’s fave, and yet, I always finding myself siding with his sister, Jeanie, because Ferris gets away with pretty much everything. He can do no wrong, because he’s one of *those people*. And being siblings with the righteous dudes of the world is fucking frustrating.

*I know* because—up until my irmã and I moved to so-called Australia with Mamãe—my siblings were nothing short of *adored* by everyone in my small world, a big part of which was church.

My irmão—all boyish looks and hair like Derek Sheppard’s, a.k.a. McDreamy—emitted a natural, gentle kindness, rare among young men in their late teens and early twenties. Once there was this big kerfuffle among the church ladies over who would be his elder in prayer—no time to get into that, it’s a *whole thing*. But it’s a wonder he only got married in his mid-thirties, considering the number of available daughters being pushed his way by their hopeful mothers.

My irmã on the other hand, was admired for her creativity. She kinda channelled *Let Go* Avril Lavigne in style, which was cool ‘cause at the time, everyone sorta dressed the same. Like, for years after we moved here, I could spot a Brazilian person in a crowd like *this*, especially women. It was always a tight, plain white t-shirt, light blue jeans and sneakers. No, not sneakers, runners. Meanwhile, my irmã made do with whatever second-hand clothes she found in the church donation pile and deemed cool, not giving two fucks whatever people thought. She also drew a lot, turned our shared bedroom walls into art pieces.

Then there was me, a quiet, skinny kid, with a huge head. Literally. My head was like *humongous* for my body. My siblings and cousins would follow me around the apartment singing, “Pirulito cabeçudo! Pirulito cabeçudo!” which means big-headed lollipop. They even had a *Macarena-*inspired dance for it and everything.

As a kid, I never really got to be Ana Maria. I was Débora and Tiago’s little sister.

Though I’ve seen the film a billion times, part of me still hopes that Ferris will eventually get caught. So, even though trying to murder her was overkill*,* I can see why Iuara’s brothers wanted to.

But still, even Jeanie helps Ferris out in the end.

\*

The difference between my siblings and Ferris, is that they weren’t show-offs, and I don’t reckon Iuara was either.

Her father was the Pajé, which means he was one of the tribe’s spiritual leaders. Pajés are basically wizards: they conduct rituals, have the intel on the future, invoke and control spirits—stuff like that.

People often say that preachers’ kids are the ones who tend to “*go wrong*”, and as a daughter of a pastor myself, I’m here to tell you: they’re totally right.

It’s just what happens when you’re constantly being watched by a community.

My mãe once confessed that she isn’t such a huge a fan of organised religion, but she keeps showing up to church every Sunday because it’s comforting to be around others who share her core belief: that Jesus Cristo is her lord and saviour.

But a church can also be a breeding ground for dangerous mob-mentality. A hell-hole, if you like. And if there’s anyone who knows a thing or two about that, it’s Mamãe, who got knocked up when she was single, married a pastor who wasn’t even her baby daddy, then divorced him. The few people who *knew* that he’d been an abusive alcoholic made sure *she* was the one who came across as the bad guy in the relationship if word got out about it.

It’s a lot of pressure, having all those eyes on you. Not to mention the expectation that, as the preacher’s family, you *must* be an active member of the congregation. My siblings were part of the youth worship team, and I helped take care of babies at Sunday night services.

In my head, Iuara fought like Sarina Williams plays tennis. And her singing abilities I liken to those of J-Hud in *Dreamgirls*. So, it’s no wonder everybody was stanning her, most of all her father; she *was* his favourite.

And listen, she was probably genuinely going all Gretchen Weiners in Mean Girls, apologising about how popular she is, post Burn Book conundrum. And, you know, it’s not like her jealous brothers could disguise her foot-cream as face-lotion, or cut holes in her singlet, so they decided to kill her… *obviously.*

But as we’ve established, Iuara was a bo$$ bitch, so she killed them first.

\*

Preachers’ kids we *do* tend to “*go wrong*.”

And when we do, we must be punished harshly, made an example of. Among other things, my irmã and I turned out to be *real gay*. Lucky we moved countries before that *came out*, so the church didn’t get to discipline us.

Except, you know… we’re doomed… to burn in hell for… all of eternity, so… there’s um… there’s that.

Iuara tried to run and hide, but her father, being pretty much Dumbledore, obviously found her. At which point he just like, chucked her in the river?

I can’t find any version of the story that says the Pajé’s intention was to kill his daughter. My theory is that he was trying to make it *look* like it, otherwise he’d never hear the end of it from the rest of the church—I mean tribe!

Iuara was a warrior who grew up by the world’s widest river, *pretty sure* she’d be a champion swimmer.

I think she just gave up. Stopped swimming.

But the fish in the river recognised Iuara’s value.

Together, they brought the first half of her body up to the surface to force air back into her lungs. The second half, they transformed into their likeness, claiming her as their own.

Men still avoid the banks of o Rio Negro e Solimões at dawn. There resides Iuara.

She attracts and entrances them with her song and beauty. Once hypnotised, a sereia Amazônica pulls them down to the bottom of the river, where most drown to death.

Only a pajé of great skill can cure the madness of those who manage to survive.

\*

I’ve spent my entire life trying to put into words the pain that comes with being betrayed by your own father—one of two people who are meant to care for you with their entire beings.

I’m a bilingual writer—you’d think I would’ve come up with a description by now, but I haven’t and I’m not sure I ever will. It’s just one of those things that, if you haven’t suffered through it, you’ll never be able to comprehend the feeling.

So, what’s the point in even trying to turn it into words for others?

I’ll say this though: that pain never goes away. Neither does the feeling that if your parent is willing to hurt you so badly, there must be something *inherently* wrong with you.

Warriors or not, it’s enough to make a lot of us just give up and stop swimming.

I have, more than once.

But like the fish no Amazônas, others saw the value in me.

And like *her*, I survived.

Tripping balls on acid or not, I *am* Iuara, mãe d'água.

And one day, men *will* pay for what they’ve done to me.